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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

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Nova
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Magazine

No. 28

2/6

VOLUME 5

Scarlet

Dawn

NELSON
SHERWOOD

★

**Earthmen,
Farewell**

W. T. WEBB

★

Out There

SYDNEY J. BOUNDS



SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 5 No. 28

1962

New Science Fiction Stories

Short Novel :

SCARLET DAWN

Nelson Sherwood 2

The fused personalities of alien Sandoz in the body of Earthman Carson follow a million-year-old trail to discover their ultimate destiny.

Novelette :

EARTHMEN, FAREWELL

W. T. Webb 62

Ecti was a paradise planet upon which the only sentient life was the "goldies," harmless enough creatures—until somebody killed one !

Short Story :

OUT THERE

Sydney J. Bounds 105

Edited by JOHN CARNELL

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Earthman Carson and alien Sandoz became one personality in "Scarlet Denial" published in No. 26. The Carson-Sandoz combine now continue the hunt throughout the galaxy for Sandoz' mate Lys, whom he hasn't seen for a million years.

SCARLET DAWN

by NELSON SHERWOOD

Chapter One

Just who the man was, his name, his occupation, if he had a wife, children, his state of health—all these things became dramatically unimportant the moment he snatched a woman's handbag at the spaceport and started to run.

The woman screamed as her auto alarm pricked her arm. Loungers and waiting passengers stared after the running man, a dark figure of purpose among the brilliant idlers. Under Shyrane's hot sunshine and in the perfumed decadent air of the pleasure planet this incident whetted jaded appetites.

What happened then surprised the most blase of pleasure seekers.

The running snatch-purse's body glowed. His arms and legs—skinny like twigs from undernourishment—twitched. Spreadeagled, he jerked and convulsed, held like a fly in amber in the merciless stasis beam. This stasis beam was a cruel one, a searcher out of tender nerves, a flayer of souls, a torturing imprisonment, a rough and ungentle gaoler.

In seconds a solid wall of bodies formed around the transfixed, shivering thief. The yellow and grey of the Shyrane Security police and the magnificent scarlet of the Galactic Guard swamped him in colour,

"The police are really on the jump today." A paunchy man wearing too many jewels spoke with avid interest to Arthur Ross Carson. Carson stood just inside the three-storey-high entrance doors flanked in steel and glass. He took in the scene at a glance.

"It's their job," he said with studied casualness, trying to ape the bored hedonist. "We have to be protected against the lower classes."

"You're so right." The fat man, breathing heavily, did not tear his eyes away from that pitiful scene. The thief lay on the floor now, and two colonels bent over him.

The picture did not have to be coloured in, the story did not have to be spelled out for Carson. The snatch-thief had been unlucky. The poor devil was a thin bag of bones, and a vicious feeling of hatred for the fat rich blood-suckers of Shyrane—like this wheezing toad next to him now—almost, almost but not quite, engulfed Carson. The picture waited for him to walk in and complete the whole; the parts waited for him, waited with guns and flashers and stasis beams.

Sandoz said: "*We must hurry, Carson. Her signals are faint, faint and thin. The ship is being space-sealed now . . .*"

Carson heard the little alien's voice in his mind and fought to re-orient himself to this fresh problem. He spoke angrily: "*I can hurry, Sandoz, old friend. I can rush across there, buy a ticket, head for the ramp; but . . .*"

The little alien in his brain sighed that small, soft, self-deprecatory sigh. "*The word has been passed, Carson. I see. Anyone acting suspiciously will be stopped and questioned. That thief ran for it and was mercilessly hunted down. But, Carson—I must get aboard that ship! If she spaces out taking Lys—a thousand years, Carson, I might have to wait a thousand years!*"

"*That's the first time you've told me her name. Lys. I like it. Reminds me of a flower.*"

As he spoke to Sandoz, Carson had been walking slowly among the gaudy crowds, his head turned like all the rest to watch as the S.S. hoisted the thief to his feet and trundled him

away on a luggage truck. That miserable one would stay in stasis for twenty-four hours at least.

Despite the urgency of the moment, the quivering eagerness possessing the both of them to board that departing ship, Carson and Sandoz could sense quite clearly the hate and bitterness churning between the Shyrane Security police and the Galactic Guardsmen. Word had got out, then, and fast.

"If I had a false beard," Carson said and his mind recoiled at the blast of anger and self-reproach from Sandoz.

"Quick ! Find a secure place where you cannot be seen !"

In the toilet Carson took the opportunity to brush down the suit of clothes he'd snatched from a tailor's dummy as Sandoz had levitated them towards the spaceport. There had been no time to come here by ordinary means. He wondered what the people were saying now, the swearers-off drink and drugs, the hysterics, as a man in the blackened and charred black steel and leather armour of the Galactic Guard had swooped over their heads with a gent's natty suiting draped over one arm. He wondered if his friends in the Guard would hear—and understand.

Then he glanced in the mirror and his mind congealed.

A perfect stranger stared out at him from horrified eyes.

The stranger put a hand to his mouth, a hand that trembled.

Carson blinked his eyes as his hand touched his mouth and the stranger blinked his eyes as a shaking hand traced unfamiliar contours.

"What have you done ?"

"Hurry up, my dear Carson ! No one will recognise you now. I should have realised before that your face would be the feature of recognition. Changing that is a mere matter of routine for Sandoz—"

The hollow return to Sandoz' normal jocularly was a pale shadow ; the vital urgency, the fear of failure and loss underlying both their minds drained the humour away.

Back in the crowded foyer under the crystal sweep of roof Carson bought the ticket and crossed the gate threshold even as the gates clanged shut behind him.

His mind crawled. He walked with another man's face and his brain—and that of Sandoz—functioned behind the facade of another personality. What limits were there to the power of this little alien who sat spread out along his nervous system, who could see his every thought ?

Sandoz coughed his little cough and said : "*Now that we are actually—and at long last—boarding this confounded spaceship, Carson, I can allow myself to relax a trifle. Lys is aboard. That, I find hard to believe. A million years, Earth years, I have been searching for her. Even to me, and I know what time is, even to me that is a long long time.*"

Carson started to say scathingly : "Day before yesterday." But he didn't. And because he hadn't consciously projected the thought Sandoz let it go, understanding the delicate reasons for Carson's decision for silence.

They were a strange pair, complementary and yet with a cutting edge of difference that would ensure their disparate existence for no matter how long Sandoz occupied the brain and body of Arthur Ross Carson. Together they moved into the ship—together, for Sandoz would not leave the body of Carson until the Earthman died ; or so Sandoz had said.

Events had moved with frightening speed for Carson since that day—so long ago now, it seemed—when he had set a hot foot for a geegee sentry on backward Ragnor and had set in train a sequence of catastrophes and triumphs bewildering to a twenty-year-old spaceship breaker's boy. Since he had discovered that he was the son of a Grand Commander of the Galactic Guard, scientifically and genetically bred to take over command of the Guard, his mind—his own mind, the part that was not Sandoz—had seized up on the emotional plane. Alex Bors, he believed, was dead. The man who had tortured and killed Lucy, the monstrous Squeb agent of the Bureau of Status Quo Enforcement, had died screaming on the burning deck of an ancient sailing ship foundering in an artificial lake of Shyrane. Now, Carson wanted to look to the future.

And that future had narrowed into one trail of light through darkness. He must help Sandoz find his Lys.

The cabin into which he was shown was small, cramped but very comfortable. He was, the human steward confided, lucky to find a single at all. Carson tipped the man and then went up to the waving deck. He was too late. The ship had lifted off. They were in space.

"Y'know, Sandoz," Carson said ruminatively. "*This ship is not a pleasure cruiser, she's a regular passenger run taking returning holidaymakers home. First port of call Ley's planet. That's where I booked to. Yet the S.S. and the geegees were right on the ball back at the spaceport.*"

"Someone may have seen us levitating away from that burning sailing ship. You have a crude form of antigrav pack used in your culture."

"Yes. But who? I rather hope H.E. believed me when I said I'd be back." Thinking of the old warrior, the Grand Commander of the Galactic Guard, Carson felt an inexplicable wrench at leaving him. He'd looked so crushed when his hopes of Arthur Ross Carson had been dashed. "And I didn't want Harding to die for me! Dammit all, I didn't want that sort of destiny."

"Although I was searching for Lys at the time, much of what went on spilled over, and I can scan your memories. The experiment with your father and mother succeeded; that explains the amazing potential I first discovered in you."

"Potential. They said I'd never amount to anything."

"Wrong, Carson, my impetuous young friend. You wouldn't have done had you no guidance. Breaking up abandoned spaceships was no fitting academic preparation for the tasks your father's friends wanted you for."

"Well they're not getting me." Carson sounded petulant. "At least not yet. Not until we've got this business with your Lys straightened out."

"Thank you, Carson," said Sandoz.

And Carson felt that warm glow of friendship within him and was satisfied.

"You seem to be taking your time. Why don't we find out where she is, go along—"

"I've waited a million years. Until I could be sure she wouldn't slip away again, I felt every second as an agony. But now, now every second bathes me in warmth and expectation—"

"I know what you mean."

"However . . . She is now in the body of a child. The difficulties I experienced before on Shyrane of contacting her were, as I'm sure you don't understand, caused through her being forced rather suddenly to change hosts. And there is something I'm getting about the child . . . I can't read Lys at all clearly . . ."

Sensibly, Carson didn't say anything.

"Sometimes I wish . . . The thought from Sandoz lay almost below audible level; a mere mental whisper. "Sometimes I wish my people had not lost the use of their own bodies. Sometimes the price for immortality is too high . . ."

Leaving his own mind a blank, Carson went in search of a drink. Having a little alien monster inside his head was bad enough ; when the alien turned maudlin, why then, decided Arthur Ross Carson, then it was a bit too thick.

What he had tried not to think about too loudly, for the sake of the sarcasm it would bring forth, was that his friendship with the little alien monster in his head had become the most precious and rare experience, his most valuable possession, a thing he would fight and kill to keep.

Sipping some innocuous concoction of coloured sugar water, he asked Sandoz : *"If you only leave a host when the poor fellow does pass out, and it isn't—well, convenient—to change over at the time. What do you do?"*

The mental grimace of distaste soured clearly into Carson's mind.

"We can live inside a dead host if we have to. Waiting for a convenient moment. Usually any culture has devised certain rites in their disposal of the dead. There is always a time."

Chapter Two

The firstclass restaurant was filling slowly /as people wandered in for the first meal of the journey. Carson eyed each with interest, waiting for a flare of recognition from Sandoz. To Carson the hectic experiences of his recent life had brought no knowledge of handling waiters and stewards and roboservers in a spaceliner's first class restaurant. He felt a measure of gratitude that Sandoz had reshaped his face into that of an older man ; a man who ought to know how to handle himself. But he still made mistakes. Sandoz, with a mind cluttered with the mores and customs of millions of Galyears, couldn't help, either, without running through countless parallel cultures.

When Carson caught quite clearly a titter of spiteful amusement from a group of waiters over by the door, he threw down his napkin, stood up, scraping back his chair, and strode out of the restaurant, feeling the colour burning his cheeks.

"Good grief, boy!" snapped Sandoz irritably. *"You are an impetuous calf."*

"Why—were you about to make contact just as I was receiving the dirty end of that waiter's joke?"

"Simmer down, lad. You're young and untrained in the fancy ways of these people. Don't let that interfere with the functioning of your brain on matters quite unconnected with the measured ritual of eating and drinking. All cultures have their little phobias and petty rules. Yours is quite a mild affair, believe me."

"I do."

"That is good, then. I'm glad of that . . ."

Carson stopped stock still in the passageway so that a comfortably cushioned female diner emerging from the restaurant collided squashily with him. He ignored her and her indignant snort of outraged protest.

"Are you laughing at me too, Sandoz?"

The mental answer was bland and perfectly polite, a reply to which he could not take exception.

"Laughing at you, my dear Carson? Why, of course not. And, I must say that you wound me a little by harbouring so unchaste a thought."

"So you were damn well laughing at me, you little ball of goo!"

"Well, my dear boy, I've yet in all my experience to meet a culture where the bizarre conduct of a single member surrounded by conforming citizens does not result either in mirth or murder."

"Very profound, very. Come on, I need another drink."

This time Carson ordered something a little stronger than coloured sugar water. As he stood at the bar he could not stop himself from checking over everyone else there. Perhaps one of these men or women was the parent of the girl he sought?

Sandoz' concerned thought rode in. *"You're drinking a lot more than you used, dear boy. If you are fretting about Alex Bors—"*

"I'm not. I believe he burned with the ship. Now shut up and go on your woman hunt."

"Too late. The child is asleep in her cabin—"

"Well, if Lys can guide you, maybe we could find the cabin."

"Very well."

The drink hadn't touched the edge of Carson's temper. Sandoz had told him that he could drink and drug as much as he liked; Sandoz would take the filthy muck out of his system as fast as he put it in. So there.

Lights burned dim this ship night along sumptuous corridors and stairways. So far the general animation of a space voyage hadn't brought everyone into that familiar and yet superficial

bonhomie that would last until she made planetfall. People moved about with half smiles for strangers, almost furtively, waiting for deep space magic to begin.

"*This is the cabin,*" Sandoz said.

Carson stood outside the door. To left and right other doors studded the corridor wall. Discreet lighting burned pink and amber and emerald. The carpets sucked up sound. Number Ten Nine Six. The breathing heart of the ship lay ten decks down, down there where hungry engines tore the heart out of atomic nuclei, distorted space and time and hurled two hundred thousand tons of metal through space at speeds that left light crawling like a glowworm far behind. Up here the quietness carried reverence.

"*One Oh Nine Six.*" Carson said to Sandoz and the silence was not broken. Here, in this silence, with a great ship all about them, Carson felt a strange twinge of fear at the thought that the alien in his mind was talking to another alien in the brain of a small child beyond that locked door.

Then the fear brushed away instantly as Sandoz said quietly: "*She is there. Lys. I shall go away from you now, Carson, for a spell. I know you understand.*"

"*Of course, Sandoz. And—good luck.*"

Then, once again, that aching gulf of blackness opened in Carson's mind as Sandoz shut himself away. As always, fretfulness, irritability, a deep sense of loss, almost a panic sensation hit Carson as Sandoz left.

He walked slowly back to his cabin. Before he dropped off to sleep he wondered just what this girl child would be like. He was not aware of Sandoz' return before he fell asleep.

When he awoke and yawned and reached out to press the robo-server button for tea and biscuits, Sandoz had still not returned. Munching and sipping, Carson felt that black void in his brain like a judge's black cap; he just didn't like it when Sandoz went off by himself.

He'd made up his mind to stroll down to the tailors and buy a fresh suit and a half dozen white shirts, freshen himself up—the feeling of freedom the money he still had from the sale of Sandoz' synthetic jewels on Bahrein remained a heady delight—and interest himself in the life of the ship, when Sandoz returned.

"*Night on the tiles, hey, Sandoz?*"

"I find your remark incomprehensible, not having the inclination to dig for referents in your festering brain. But your inference is clear and insulting—and entirely suitable to a sexually reproducing mammalian animal."

"Yoip," said Arthur Ross Carson. At once with the little alien's return, he felt good.

Then an aura of defeat, of sagging anti-climax, seeped over. Carson said quickly: *"What's the trouble, Sandoz?"*

"It is ironical and yet amusing—at least, I am forced to blow hard on my millions of Galyears sense of humour to laugh this one off."

Sandoz sounded as though to laugh hurt.

"You recall I have experienced difficulty in contacting Lys? The reason for that at first was that she was changing hosts. The girl child, I thought, would or might explain the more recent cloudiness of contact."

"But that's not all?"

"No. The child is mentally crippled."

"She's an idiot?"

"Not quite. Parts of her brain are infected, Lys tells me. The poor little girl is a most unpleasant host. You can't imagine it—"

"I don't know, Sandoz. Would it be like me living in a house with wooden floors stinking with dryrot, with the roof leaking, with fungus growing along the walls—with the drains stopped up and the toilets overflowing?"

"That is a close parallel."

Carson had surprised himself with the vehemence of his description. Spill-over from Sandoz? Probably; the two entities grew closer together every day in their symbiosis.

"Well—" Carson said slowly, carefully. "I know something of your powers, Sandoz. Can't Lys heal the girl's brain? If I lived in that awful house I'd begin to mend the floors, unplug the drains . . ."

"Not if the damage was too widespread. Not if the house threatened to collapse at any moment—"

"The girl's dying?"

"Lys says so. She is easing the pain—that is the least she can do. Let us go along there now. I want to see Lys' host."

"They might not let us in—"

One Oh Nine Six remained shut. Carson knocked. A nurse in white cap and the uniform of the Saint Alison Sisterhood opened the door; but she stood four square in the portal, effectively preventing Carson from entering.

"Yes?"

"Hey, Sandoz—what's the girl's name?"

"Yvette Duclos."

"Nurse, I'd like to see Miss Yvette Duclos, please."

The nurse registered surprise. A colourless creature on the surface she might be, but Carson caught the reality of devoted nursing, of tenacious purpose, lying just beneath that placid exterior. He smiled charmingly with his new face and held up the box of chocolates and sheaf of flowers purchased on inspiration moments before from a robo-server in the foyer.

"I thought she might—"

"Yvette is unconscious. She is very ill, very ill indeed. I don't think—who are you?"

"John Canning." Carson gave the name he'd used to buy the ticket. "I'm an old friend of the family—"

"Well, I'll see Mrs. Duclos."

"Thank you, nurse. You're very kind."

The nurse shut the door in his face. There lay nothing of rudeness in the action; it was mere medical practice of taking no chances.

"Listen to me, Carson. Lys can tell me from the girl's memories enough to scrape you by as a family friend. But don't talk too fast. Understood?"

"Check. If the situation wasn't so tragic and the stakes so high this would be fun."

"Carson!" Genuine astonishment, gratitude, warmth of affection tinged Sandoz' surprised thought stream. "Look, boy—don't build this up as a great tragic drama! I've waited a million years for Lys. As soon as this poor little girl dies Lys can transfer—your sympathy should be for Yvette Duclos, not Lys or me."

"I know. But I'm not cynical enough or old enough to dragoon my emotions."

The door opened to reveal a short, pleasant woman wearing a synthisilk kimono, very black hair and with a face that shone naked of makeup with swollen eyes and red nose and a pitiful resignation.

"I'm Mrs. Duclos. I don't know a Mr. John Canning—"

Reading from Sandoz quick thoughts, which the alien picked up from Lys, who in turn rifled the memories of Yvette Duclos, Carson put together a spacetight story of an old meeting with Yvette. Mrs. Duclos nodded,

"My husband was alive then, of course. Please come in Mr. Canning."

Yvette Duclos was eight years old. She lay in a spaceship berth, small and shrunken, doll-face and swollen eyelids, purplish blue, tight shut, puckered mouth thinned pathetically in so young a child. Her hands, paper-transparent, lay limply on the bedspread.

Seeing her, Carson's pity broke.

"*Can't you or Lys do anything, Sandoz ?*"

"*I'm sorry, Carson.*"

A monstrous suspicion blossomed in Carson's mind and, so strong was its impact, Sandoz caught it at the same time the vitriolic thoughts formed.

"*Carson ! You cannot believe that of us ! Don't you comprehend yet that, brief though the time may be to us that we spend in an individual host, we belong to that host, we sympathise with it—a state of empathy is reached that even now you and I, Carson, are only just beginning to explore. Lys couldn't allow her host to die if she could do anything at all to prevent it ! We're not made that way ! You're doing us both an injustice . . .*"

"*Sorry, Sandoz. I believe you. It just seemed so—so convenient for you that Yvette should die so that Lys could transfer into a mature body.*"

"*I know. But it isn't like that at all.*"

Mrs. Duclos said sadly : "Now you have seen my daughter, Mr. Canning, you will understand. There is no hope. All our miracles of modern brain surgery can do nothing for her. The doctors give her a week. I—I don't know what to do . . ."

As soon as he could with decency leave, Carson said goodbye, promised to look in again, refrained from meaningless words of hope to Mrs. Duclos and went back to the spaceship's lounge. He felt the charnel breath of the sickroom clinging to him. An eight year old girl, dying, sliding out of this life and all the bright promise of the future—and all the wit and skill of mankind's medicine could do nothing for her.

He was aware of a delicate fumbling in Sandoz' thought.

"*The little girl is going to die, Carson. I don't know if they will bury her in space or take her back to her home planet. But—but Lys will have to transfer. I—ah—I am wondering if you have any—ah—preference in her choice of next host.*"

"*Do what ?*" Carson was astounded.

"I mean," Sandoz said patiently. "*Lys and I want to have offspring of our own—*"

"*That's fair enough—wait a minute ! How can you ? I mean—you're both just little balls of goo—*"

"*I told you we understood the mystery of sex. I am not at ease in a female body as Lys is not in a male. We have had to occupy this sort of transposition of sex from time to time, of course. But now—it is essential that Lys occupy a body capable of bearing children.*"

"*Well I'll go to the Horse Head Nebula !*" said Arthur Ross Carson. A passing passenger stared at him with a look that ought to have brought him to his senses. But his mouth just hung open in an imbecilic grimace of incredulous disbelief.

"*There are about a hundred of my people in this Galaxy. Our immortality is only relative. We must have children so that our race may live. You do not think I am being presumptuous in wanting that ?*"

"*N—No, of course not. But—well—I don't know what to say. I suppose when the Terran child is born a new one of you is born also ?*"

"*Yes. Our seed germinates alongside yours.*"

"*I see.*" The implications of this began to sink in. A curious revulsion built up in Carson. For the first time in many days he thought again of Lucy, his lost love, of the way her flame hair curled—and of the way he had seen her, broken and white on the trolley after Alex Bors, the Squeb, had finished with her. He had wanted Lucy badly. He had been going to marry her. Afterwards—afterwards women hadn't bothered him. He'd made them not bother him. They would have been salt rubbed into the yawning wound.

But now. Now his friend Sandoz wanted children. But Sandoz did not have a body of his own. He occupied the body of Arthur Ross Carson and Carson was immeasurably happy that this should be so. And if Sandoz and Lys wanted a child then they could only have that child through the agency of their hosts' bodies.

It all made sense.

"*I'll have to think about it,*" Carson said at length. "*It's not easy for me to adjust. After Lucy—nothing else mattered and then you came along to channel my revenge for Alex Bors. Now he's dead. So there is left only my friendship with you . . .*"

"Yvette Duclos is not yet dead, Carson. Perhaps the next choice of hosts will again be beyond the jurisdiction of us, or of Lys."

"Don't feel too badly about it, Sandoz. I'll figure a way out. Only, with us and despite the ridiculous divorce rates, marriage is a solemn rite. And I wouldn't bring a child into the world outside the marriage contract. Not even now. Not even in our marvelous galactic civilisation. You understand?"

Sandoz said : *"I understand that you have been conditioned by the mores of your culture. I would not seek to destroy your peace of mind by forcing you to alter your beliefs to satisfy me. But the logical way will be found."* Sandoz gave his small dry mental cough. Then he said with a burst of frightening intensity : *"A way must be found !"*

Chapter Three

Carson decided to push all worries over his fouled up sex-life out of his head. Not for the first time he smiled—a little deprecatingly—at the thought that he could harbour thoughts and lines of reasoning connected with the guest in his brain without the slightest hint of self-consciousness. He was not embarrassed at thinking about Sandoz, knowing the alien could read every nuance of his host's thought processes.

The way of life he had glimpsed on Shyrane and which was in a minor way reflected aboard this luxurious starship opened up new vistas of understanding how men and women lived. A spaceship breaker's boy could have no knowledge of the immense wealth and sybaritic comfort of the upper classes' lives. He might hear about it ; he couldn't grasp it. Carson gave himself up to finding out just what he'd been missing.

The journey to Ley's planet took a week. Carson, already on friendly terms with the grief-stricken Mrs. Duclos, had booked on to her destination, of which all he knew was that it was called Jazzstar.

Yvette was still alive. She had not been to her home on Jazzstar since she was three years old and could therefore be of little help. Lys picked up some infantile memories that even the girl didn't know she held ; but Carson through Sandoz could only feel his way warily. Telling Mrs. Duclos, whose husband had been a real estate tycoon, that he was a company director and then being vague about the activity of his company

had been the only smoke screen he could think up. A real estate tycoon and a spaceship breaker's boy made strange company.

"Well," he said firmly to Sandoz. "*Tell Lys it's no go if it's Mrs. Duclos.*"

The ship made a one day stop-over on Ley's planet but Carson did not leave her. He stood near the entrance valve of the waving deck watching a bloated red sun cast distorted shadows from trees that drifted through porridgy air, dangling root tendrils that licked and twined hungrily for insectival prey. The natives called them Neo-Portuguese Men of War. Carson didn't like the look of them and, for some reason, they reminded him that he'd never enquired about the *Razzee* from Marjoram VI that had killed Colonel Stacey.

Turning to walk over synthipersian carpeting to the ship's library his eye was arrested by a group of purposeful looking men ascending the ramp with quick energetic strides. Somehow, about them, clung none of the air of languid holiday-making, of routine business trips that made of all the other passengers a puddingy mass of nondescripts. They walked with a bounce. There were six of them, each with a brief case, and each was tall and wide and tough with a face that stood no nonsense and had forgotten what mercy was.

Sandoz said : "*Squebs.*"

Panic hit Carson. He remained standing there as the valves closed, the ramp slid down and away. Undercover agents of the Bureau of Status Quo Enforcement, the most powerful political body in the galaxy, that ran the government, that had sought his life—here ? Well, then, they could only be here for one reason. To carry on where their agents Crow and Bors had failed.

"*Walk slowly to a toilet, Carson. I'll change your face again.*"

"*What about the Duclos ?*"

"*Lys will have to handle that. What interests me is how did the Statque get their information that you were aboard. Always assuming, naturally, that they are after you.*"

"*They are. You can bet your immortal soul they are.*"

"*I have a near immortal brain without a soul being necessary, dear boy ; but I understand your meaning.*"

In the cover of the toilet Carson's face changed again. He could not, at the last, bear watching the writhing movements

of his flesh reflected in the mirror. When it was all over he saw with an appalled glance that an old man stared back at him.

"You'll have to walk slowly, shuffle, bend over. I'll help. I don't want your body messed up—now that Lys is so near."

"You'd just transfer to another—"

"Of course I would!" Sandoz flared the thought like a cutting edge. "But—for some stupid reason that I'm ashamed to own—I've grown fond of you, young Carson. I don't want to part from you before I have to. Now let's get on and make a fresh booking."

Chuckling, his fears banished, Carson rebooked. The old codger had spilt a lot of emotional background then.

"The most noticeable characteristic of Crow—and Bors too, to a lesser degree—was their very lack of noticeable characteristics. Why are these Squebs so full of bounce and energy? You can tell from a parsec away that they're not here on pleasure."

Sandoz chuckled dryly. *"You tell me."*

"If we knew that we might know how they'd got on to us."

Again Sandoz chuckled. *"I might be able to do something about that."*

Hobbling along with the jerkily shuffling, dot and carry one gait of an old man, Carson found a chair at the next table to where the six Squebs sat drinking. The bar contained a comfortable clientele, smoking and drinking, talking with spurts of laughter rising. The Squebs glanced casually at Carson, looked away, talked quietly among themselves.

"Are you getting anything, Sandoz?"

"Yes. We've been careless. Also I have learned that your forensic systems are remarkably well-developed. Reminds me of the Algipon culture—oh, about fifty million years ago—where half the men spent their time chasing the other half."

"What are you receiving?"

"Fingerprints, observation and clothes, my dear boy."

"Oh."

"We were seen levitating to the spaceport. The clothes were recorded and recognised. And fingerprints were obtained. The Squebs joined us at Ley's planet with a single order."

Carson tried to remember he had the face of an old man. *"I can guess. Kill Arthur Ross Carson."*

"Yes."

"Have the Guards discovered me, too?"

"I don't think so. These six Squebs here radiate complete and utterly ruthless confidence. The Guards are not in the picture."

"Well, for the first time I feel sorry they're not breathing on my neck. Captain Jose and some of the others would be handy to have around now. They want me alive—and the Statque want me dead."

"I think, my dear boy, you had better walk away like an old man—but quickly. It may have escaped your attention; but at the moment you're wearing the clothes we took from Shyrane."

Cold horror hit Carson then. His old man's face wouldn't fool the Statque men for an instant; they were used to clumsy disguises, they looked for the betraying signs of carriage, body, clothes—he stood up shakily and tottered off.

The first bullet struck the door by his head and only by grace of solid bullets aboard a spaceship was he saved. At once he ducked and dived through, his old man's posture instantly forgotten. He raced madly up the corridor. Doors flashed past him; but he dare not stop to try one. He only just made the corner. A fusillade rapped sharply against the far wall as he skidded around. He felt his face writhing again and guessed Sandoz was working another switch. But of what use was that now? Now what he wanted was armour plate, a gun—or a safe hidey hole.

Feet slapping soundlessly on the thick carpet he panted along, feeling the blood gushing around his body in the first exercise aboard ship. The devil of it was, he couldn't hear the Squebs on this deep pile carpet. He risked a glance back, saw the first Statque agent show, ducked and heard the evil snap of the bullet above his head. A spiral staircase showed ahead, manual reserve in case of elevator failure, leading to the boat deck.

He sprinted up in maniacal bounds, leaping like a springbok up the metal treads. Bullets clamoured from steel railing and supports. The breath clogged in his throat. The boat deck lay before him, a long bare expanse walled with the valve locks to the lifeshells.

"No time for a lifeboat," he said to Sandoz.

Desperation tore at him. Those men were killers. They hadn't waited to talk, to give him a chance. As soon as they had recognised his clothes and been sure—they'd fired.

His lungs strained against his rib cage and his heart swelled in pulsating effort. The taste of bile thickened on his tongue. Sweat blurred his vision. He did not know where he was

running ; the single dominant thought hammered at him :
"Run ! Run ! Escape !"

The blow on his leg stabbed like a numbing jolt of electricity. There was no pain. But he was lying on the metal decking, staring blankly upwards at ceiling lights, feeling that cold absence of sensation in his left leg as though he'd caught it in a fish trap, waiting for them to come for him.

A face swam into vision, held suspended over him like a satellite moon swinging over its primary. A large face, with wide thin brown lips, small very black eyes, an immaculate hair-styling. A face, this, that masked a mind that knew exactly where it was going and was indifferent to whoever might get in the way—for they would be the loser.

"A quick snapshot that," the mouth belonging to the face said, the voice low and polite and artificially modulated. "You always were handy with a gun, Mark."

Another face joining that hanging circle above his head. A sharp-featured face this time, thicker-lipped and with narrow rat's eyes and a bad complexion.

"Thank you, Simon, for those kind words. Now what do we do with him ?"

"Are you questioning your orders, Mark ?"

Fear flickered briefly in those narrow eyes. Then : "Always the needler, right, Simon ? When the Statque order, no one—but no one—disobeys or questions. I merely meant which particular way did you want to dispose of him."

The smooth, almost flippant words, could not conceal the absence of humanity in these men. The Statque ordered and they obeyed. Thought existed merely for expert planning, not for questioning their orders.

Simon said : "We'll shut the captain's mouth easily enough; but we don't want too many passengers aroused by a starship shooting. That service airlock over there. Put him through that."

Carson tried to struggle, tried to ward off the groping hands. He called with desperate horror to Sandoz for help ; but the little alien did not respond.

Sandoz—at this time of all times—had left him !

They picked him up with contemptuous ease, gripping his limbs rigidly, stilling his struggles, artfully grasping his body so that the slightest movement shot agony through his muscles.

"Sandoz !" he called into the empty recesses of his brain.
"Sandoz ! Help me !"

The Squebs operated the service airlock valves ; the inner slid aside. They tossed him in and he fell all spreadeagled. Hobbling on one leg, the other dragging uselessly, he clawed up at the closing door.

"No !" Carson screamed. "You don't have to kill me ! You don't understand ! I'm not going to join the Guard ! No ! No ! No !"

But the airlock valve hissed shut on ramair and the red cycling light went on, shining eerily across oiled machinery and smooth plastic panelling.

Carson collapsed on to the decking, lay with his head raised, saliva trickling down his chin, his lips working horribly, gazing at the outer valve. The hiss and suck of air cycling back into the ship dwindled in pitch as the air thinned. He took a deep breath. His flesh crawled with the horror of the moment, his hands scrabbled on the deck.

In seconds now the airlock would be exhausted, he would live fractionally in a vacuum—and then the outer valve would crack and he would be spewed out on the last of the air, tossed naked into the maw of space.

The last words of Simon echoed terrifyingly in his brain.
"*Let him eat space !*"

This was the moment—it had to be, it must be—when rescue would arrive. In the next heartbeat the air would come miraculously gushing back into the airlock. He waited in fervent expectation of that moment on the opposite end of the seesaw of terror that held on this end the spectre of the opening airlock valve. Of course they'd come for him. Simon, Mark, even—they might be trying to frighten him. Some of the crew would bustle up, annoyed that civilians were playing with ship equipment. *Something* must happen. *Someone* must fetch him back from nightmare. *He wasn't going to die !*

The airlock valve heaved itself open and Carson spun helplessly out into the void.

He felt nothing.

Mouth open, eyes bulging, skin crawling, his body whirled out and away from the starship. Stars passed rotating before his eyes like sparks flying from a forge. His brain had congealed. This, then, was the final moment of his life . . .

"You do manage to get yourself into interesting predicaments," Sandoz said conversationally. "For a protoplasmic being you have a perverted penchant for poison-gas planets and the airlessness of space. What the blazes are you doing out here?"

The relief weakened his last reserves of strength.

All he could say was : *"I like it here."*

Weak and unfunny ; but a man dragged from the smoking caverns of hell by his heels is in no mood for cracking jokes.

"You did not attain escape velocity relevant to the ship's mass, so we'll fall back presently. Carson—Yvette Duclos is dying. She has only the last few moments of life left to her. And—she is dying alone !"

"Alone ! But—"

"Her mother is asleep, exhausted, and the nurse has been taken away by one of the Squebs. I am rather worried. Lys tells me there is no need, but—"

His own problems, so dramatically solved, receded from Carson's mind. If Sandoz could keep him alive on a planet writhing with green poison gas, then he could equally keep him alive in the void of space. He said : *"Why would a Squeb take the nurse?"*

"You'd been connected with the Duclos. That was reason enough for that gentry."

"They're ruthless, Sandoz. Cruel and merciless. We've got to do something about the nurse as well as finding Lys a new host." All his attempts to carry off this escape casually were breaking down as he remembered against his will that moment of terror in the airlock just before the valves cracked open. He had been on the brink of death. Any ordinary man would have been dead by now. He tried to throw off the shakes and realised dully that his wounded left leg did not hurt.

"What about my leg, Sandoz?"

"There was a bullet in it—I didn't think you'd require that, so I dissolved it and cleaned up the damaged tissues. Forget it."

"Thanks, Sandoz. I'll forget that—but not the Squebs Simon and Mark."

Chapter Four

Around him all space burned brightly with stars. He recognised some of the unfamiliar constellations by reason of his long perusal of the starcharts aboard the alien ship he and Sandoz had used ; and, strangely, he could find none of the weird and chilling dismay he expected he would have experienced whirling beneath alien constellations. An idea began to grow in him that from now on all of space was his home.

The ship lay brilliant and glowing from a thousand protected ports, a single diamond-hard point of light scintillating from her prow as the light from a distant sun struck and rebounded. She looked beautiful and sinister, filled with the power and pride of the human race, a metal bubble of air and light and warmth amid an ocean of hungry death. A responsive pride lifted Carson's heart as he looked at the starship, a thrilling sense of the destiny of the human race that held no arrogance, no false heroics ; but a solemn knowledge that mankind must ever push on and out, for to stagnate was a death just as final as the emptiness all about.

They were falling back to the starship now as Sandoz said :
" You are a strange people, you Terrans. Like children—and yet possessed of the most wonderful gift that intelligence can ever possess. I'm glad that Lys and I met when you Earthpeople were alive in the galaxy."

And that effectively punctured the bubble of aspiration boasting away in Carson. For to Sandoz and Lys, near immortals, Earthmen must appear as just another race who exploded from their planet to strut the stage of the galaxy for a few spins of that astronomical lens, and then to disappear. Disappear ? Why should they ? Man's so-called manifold destiny among the stars need never end if he conquered first his own black gulfs. The Bureau of Status Quo Enforcement attempted to retain the old patterns unaltered and yet every sense screamed that this could only be the retrograde path Man must go on.

His feet struck the metal hull and Sandoz cushioned the shipfall.

" Yvette Duclos is near her end, Carson."

" Let's find a damned airlock and go help."

" First I will change your face yet again, and we must pick up fresh clothes. Don't forget I don't want your body damaged irreparably. For a variety of reasons."

"Your concern touches me."

"Ah! You are regaining your usual hasty self. Good. Lys has seen a small animal—a pet of your people. She can transfer there if she must."

"That would be Mrs. Duclos' cat. An Arcturan Siamese cat. Horrid beast. Still . . ."

"Yvette is sinking. The cabin remains empty."

"Poor little kid. Some of the money wasted on pleasure on Shyrane spent on medical research might have saved her."

"Lys is becoming hard to read. Her radiations attenuate . . ." Sandoz' little sigh fluttered like a falling silken scarf into Carson's mind. "It is over. Yvette Duclos is dead."

"Miss Pepper," said Arthur Ross Carson derisively. "Now what sort of name is that?"

"Equally, dear boy, what sort of animal is an Acturan Siamese Cat? It seems to be a burden determined to be borne by intelligent creatures that they feed, house, clothe where necessary, love and bully lesser animals. I've seen it in culture after culture. You people of Earth are no exceptions. Mind you"—that little cough echoed cheerfully, tinged with gentle malice—"You've picked strange choices. And these cats, in particular, seem to get away with murder."

"An apt choice of phrase, if nothing else." Carson sat further back in the chair and glanced about the dimly lit tv lounge. Vagrant gleams glanced from contact lenses, white teeth, the glitter of a ring and the dull glow of a cigarette, scents of perfumed women titillated his nostrils and the giggling whispers of occupied couples reached him rustlingly. "If the Squebs penetrate your latest disguise, Sandoz, the next murder will be ours—no, mine, rather."

"Mortality shouldn't make you bitter, Carson."

"Maybe not. But compared with your immortality—relative or otherwise—it doesn't make me exactly delirious with anticipatory joy."

"I can do little to help you there. Even I, even Lys and I with all the Galyears to play with, desire children. Maybe you ephemerae have the same immortality as us in the long run."

To answer that in the same ironic vein would be a negation and denial of belief in humanity. Carson took refuge in a return to his complaint about Mrs. Duclos' ginger ball of fire, Miss Pepper.

"How's Lys getting along in there, Sandoz?"

"I imagine the expression you Earth people would use in her position would be: 'Could be worse.' There is a limitation on her powers imposed by the contraction of the cat's brain in comparison to a human beings. I remember the dragonfly creature in which I first met you, Carson. Intelligence cleaves to intelligence."

Carson said nastily: "If you think a blasted cat and I are going to have offspring, you'd better reorganise your genetic hopes, chum."

Sandoz' dry chuckle infuriated Carson.

"What you Earthlings mean by love is fully grasped by Lys and me. We can be patient a little longer. After all, a million years is a long time, even to near-immortals."

Carson concentrated his attention on the tv screen. They were advertising a new model interplanetary runabout and the sales gimmick incorporated a comic strip effect where the protagonist—the consumer image—rescued a glorious girl from a fiery death in the sun only because his interplanetary runabout was the very model being sold. Any other make, Carson gathered, would have melted from truck to keelson. He yawned and rubbed his eyes.

"Planetfall in about eight hours. I could use some sleep."

"You no longer have a cabin, remember? I'll get you off the ship when she berths. At this moment the Squebs are relaxing and congratulating one another on another job smoothly carried out. But if you relax—" He finished: "Anyway, they released the nurse unharmed."

Suddenly, Carson no longer felt tired.

"Thanks, Sandoz. I suppose you just liquidated the toxins from my muscles and like that? Considerate."

"Something like that. I need an active body and brain for my host. Nothing second best will do—"

"I'm not going to lie down beside a big ginger tom cat and commit suicide. You've had that!"

"A pity," Sandoz said, infuriatingly. "That would be one interesting way of overcoming our present bodily incompatibility."

"Pseuicide," Carson said, luxuriating in the wonderfully warm feeling of safety having Sandoz as a guest engendered. "And you'd be a victim and murderer, all rolled into one." He knew, without Sandoz having to tell him, that he'd never commit suicide whilst the little alien extended along his nervous system, guiding, counselling, being the best friend a man could

ever have. "What do you know of Jazzstar?" he finished quickly, covering that moment of emotional lift.

"The planet is, as far as I can gather, a world once well known to me. The Rilla—you remember I mentioned them to you soon after we teamed up on the noxious world of green poisonous gas and carnivorous lantern flowers—came bursting out of their overpopulated worlds to over-run the Galaxy—or a major portion of it."

The thought-stream in Carson's brain carried overtones of a memory that Sandoz, despite his awesome powers, still could not recall without a very human feeling of irritation. Carson knew enough now to understand that a human being would recall a like memory with horror and terror and a great repugnance.

"The Rilla. So far I have not encountered any reference to them in your knowledge, or in the stored records of your human race so far available to me ; although we shall, I do not doubt, my dear boy, spend some time perusing all the archives we can lay our hands on. Your hands, that is."

"What about the Rilla and Jazzstar?"

"In those days Jazzstar was called The Purple Planet of Most Pleasurable Desire by the people living there. They were humanoid—basing, as I must, all my descriptions of aliens on your referents—and a comfortable, happy folk, quite content with their level of culture. I'd gone there because, a few million Galyears before a martial and aggressive race had flourished there and I wanted to know what had happened to them."

"And?"

"They had been buried under the detritus of the years. The Happy Folk lived an idyllic life there. Odd, that. Most races call themselves the Thinking Men. These people put Happy before thought . . ."

Carson notched up a trigger to remember to ask why Sandoz had been curious enough to return to a planet after a few million years to check on a warlike race. If Sandoz picked up the thought now he gave no indication of it ; but went on with his rundown on the history of Jazzstar, the planet they were now approaching.

"You can probably discern what happened. In their voracious forays, building gradually over the centuries into an interstellar conquest, the Rilla bumped into Jazzstar. The Rilla were in the

midst of a campaign against a particularly tough and virile little race, and Jazzstar, whose Happy Folk had no space travel, spun in her orbit right on the perimeter of power."

"So the place became a battlefield?"

"Yes."

"This tough little race, whatever their name was, were wiped out, the Rilla triumphed, and Jazzstar, the Purple Planet of Most Pleasurable Desire, was left a blackened and seared mausoleum."

"More or less. But the Rilla did not obliterate the planet; instead they built it up, garrisoned it, turned it into a most impressive bastion fronting their new conquests. Seldom have I seen a more lavishly furnished fortress dedicated to interstellar warfare. As a rough estimate, it was said, the entire resources of ten planetary systems of the order of your Solterran ancestors would be necessary even to break through the outer defences."

"Some place." But the word Solterra brought a sharp and penetrating image to Carson's mind. Of himself, listening as H.E. spoke and the barbed words flickered, hearing that he, Arthur Ross Carson, had been born on Earth, on the fabulous mother world of all humanity.

Sandoz thought rode in gently. *"One day, Carson, you will visit Earth again."*

"Again!" Carson said, and the ache in him sang with self-directed mockery.

"Well, now, my boy," Sandoz brisked. *"What else do you require to know about Jazzstar?"*

"Huh," said Carson sarcastically. *"You've told me a romantic story of bygone battles; but you've told me nothing of what the Jazzstar we're making planetfall on in a few hours is like!"*

"And 'huh!' to you, too. How do I know? You've had the benefit of the impressions Lys picked up from Yvette Duclos. A little girl's memories of a great house with many windows. Of more than one bright sun—that strikes me as odd; The Purple Planet of Most Pleasurable Desire orbited a single sun—G type—and of a nursery ten miles square covered with dolls. That enough? Or should I—?"

"Y'know," Carson said conversationally. *"Sometimes I regret I can't take a good poke at your nose. You need to be trimmed down, old codger!"*

"Dear boy. So friendly—"

"What were the Rilla like? I'm beginning to get a few ideas how we might be able to cash in on all your cobwebby memories."

"Cobwebby memories!"

Suddenly and with shocking clarity, Carson understood why Sandoz persisted in his little anecdotes of places and planets long perished. Up until the time he had made contact with *Lys*, the little alien lived on his memories. They were all he had. Passing from one host to another, re-orientating himself life-span after life-span, sometimes in months, sometimes in years, sometimes living in congenial symbiosis with intelligence, sometimes merely existing in dull and miniscule brains that were all instinct and thalamus, Sandoz carried his satchel of memories with him to prove that he was himself, to reassure himself of his own identity.

To Carson then, in that dim tv lounge aboard a starship plunging down to planetfall on Jazzstar, came another link in the chain of empathy binding him to the little bodiless alien Sandoz.

"I understand, Sandoz—now."

"The Rilla were a most uncomfortable race, even more barbed and touchy than you, Carson, ferocious and merciless and with a viable culture based purely on strength—might is right, as a rule-of-thumb procedure for government, can work."

Chapter Five

Sandoz, Carson guessed, had rushed on with his tale of the long ago to cover his own feelings at this new stage in their symbiosis. All of life was a growing and a learning; stagnation was anti-life. Carson felt more strongly at each new turn in his relationship with Sandoz that life was a forward process, a stretching out timewards in a progress that had begun and might end but that now occupied fully every thinking member of the human race.

"I remember you once told me that you could do things with me—me, that is, as a representative of a race—that you hadn't been able to do since the Rilla had stalked the Galaxy. Are we so much alike, then?"

"Yes—and very much no. You have the same thrust and drive and power complex; but also you have the saving gifts of humour, and love and appreciation of art—that is, of concepts, ideas and

forms outside the touchable concrete experience of everyday life. The Rilla lived only for themselves, the moment, and the accumulation of galactic power, wealth and prestige."

"What were they like? To look at I mean."

"They were protoplasmic; they possessed a head, binocular eyes, a mouth with which to feed and ear-discs for hearing. They breathed oxygen through a chest filter and diaphragm movement with a carbon dioxide haemoglobin circulation similar to yours."

"So they had no noses?"

"Two smelling slits. Sharing with your quadrupedal ancestors, they developed inevitably two limbs for locomotion and two for manipulation. I'd hardly define them as humanoid, in deference to your taste. But their features of physiological structure in fact had developed along not too dissimilar lines." Sandoz coughed his tiny tic of self-depreciation. "I never enjoyed any Rilla as a host."

"But, surely, they must have had some saving graces?"

"The single virtue they prized above all others was to die well. They lied, cheated, stole, murdered without a qualm. As everyone lived within the same framework, the culture, as I have said, was viable. They developed a strong class structure and that helped to hold their civilisation together." Sandoz had now firmly bestridden the hobbyhorse of memory and Carson could not hold him back—if he had wanted to cut the flow of remembrance.

"You humans have a covering of naked skin; the Rilla retained in many places a horny covering. Their eyes were long and narrow, slits from which intense black pupils glared with hatred, arrogance and contempt upon all whom they met."

"Sounds nice company—"

"I tell you this, Carson, knowing you as I do, to any member of Homo sapiens, the Rilla would appear monstrous, inhuman, frightening—coldly alien and unknowable. Your two races would never have mingled without bloody war."

"Good job they lived so long ago, then."

"So long ago. Yes. Tell me, I can pick up traces of a plan beginning to ferment in your apology for a brain. I assume you have not been pumping me about the Rilla and Jazzstar for the pleasure of my anecdotal repertoire? This ties in with your present predicament?"

"I've not thought coherently yet. Is that why you can't see what I'm thinking?"

"Probably. There are layers deep within your brain where your mind lurks—dark recesses, I remember, I once used apropos them—and until you finally decide what you wish to think I, too, do not know. It seems obvious."

"So I can do a little private thinking every now and again? Well, that doesn't bother me. It should, I suppose; but having you spread out along my nervous system and prodding into my brain just means that my friend is nearer than any man's friend has ever been before."

"True—unless Lys or another of my people has made a friend of an Earthman."

"That's an intriguing thought . . ."

The tv screen claimed Carson's attention as the drama running—cunningly Statque-slanted piece of propaganda wherein the hero, a frontier planet farmer, finally decided to stick with the soil and the nuclear tractor plough in preference to flitting starwards with the blonde—finally ground to a star-spangled finish. The news began. All was not well, the news reader said, within the higher echelons of the Galactic Guard.

On to the screen flashed a jumpy telescopic foreshortened shot of Admin Centre on Perivale, the local governmental planet, bustling with activity as the top brass of the Galactic Guard arrived for a hurried conference. Carson, watching, had all thought of the Rilla driven from his mind as he stared at that heavy figure, conservatively clad in russet synthisilk, the square face with its puffy eyelids and lines grooved there by years of command, as the man stamped up the entrance steps.

"H.E." Carson said, softly. *"I still feel mean about running out on him. He's a fine man—the best man I've ever known."*

Other generals and high officials of the Guard entered Admin Centre. Then Carson sat up. A grizzled veteran with radiation scars mottling his seamed face sprang lightly from a ground car, sprinted up the steps.

"Captain Jose!"

"It seems then, dear boy, that the geegees are still concerned about you—"

"... if the proposed constitutional changes are pushed through the Galactic Guard will become virtually a minor element of the police system." The announcer read with the flat voice of the professional. Carson wondered if the man realised the enormity of what he was saying. If the Galactic

Guard were stripped of their peculiar powers, relegated to mundane police work as mere agents of the government, all policy dictated by non-Guards officers, then the Bureau of Status-Quo Enforcement would have won. They would have succeeded in channelling all power in the human portion of the Galaxy into their hands. And that, it was frighteningly clear to Carson, now, would result in the collapse of all that was left to humanity of communication, co-operation, friendship. The Galaxy would fall apart.

"The work of the Statque," the news reader droned on, "to maintain, to keep things as they are, to fight against the entropy that is closing down a chapter of Human history, will be materially assisted if the Galactic Guard pass under control of the Statque."

"Rubbish!" exploded Carson.

"His excellency, the Grand Commander of the Guard, is known to resist this natural evolutionary trend. During talks with the Statque he emphasized the importance in his eyes of the Guard's separate existence. Since the last days of the Human Federation, governments have not been stable; only the Statque and the Guard have remained permanently in being. Now it seems that the Statque will at last be able to go ahead in full control, bringing to us all directly the many benefits of their work. But for them the Human Federations' mighty empire would long since have fractured into countless aimless planets and tiny groupings. The Statque maintain."

"And that, my boy, is what H.E. and the others in the Guard, wanted you for. You, Carson, could prevent that—"

"I'm not interested! At the moment we're out to find Lys a decent body, arrange it so that you and she have a fine bouncing nipper. Check?"

"Check, Carson," Sandoz, said, a whisper of thought brushing Carson's mind. "And—thank you."

"You're pretty useless, Sandoz, aren't you, when it comes to the big one?" Carson loaded his thoughts with sarcasm.

"When we're really up against it, you fade out."

"I fail to see why such remarks are brought into this not very edifying conversation, whipper-snapper. But you ask of me something that—"

"Why? That's all I want to know. Why won't you make me invisible?"

From his vantage point in a scheduled angle of the waving deck with pushing, happy passengers passing through the opened airlock valves, Carson could look out on the city of Morton's spacefield here on Jazzstar. The spaceport looked like a million others. Impatiently, Carson turned his thoughts inwards again.

"You said you could do it. Well, why not?"

"Are you questioning my veracity?"

"Yes."

"Well, you young ingrate! I'll almost allow myself the pleasure of turning you invisible for a few seconds, only I have more concern for our body than you have. When I make you invisible the trick is done by molecular re-arrangement, the planes are aligned differently so that light is allowed through, as through glass. But it demands tremendous reserves of energy from the cells and they drain—by the time you return to visibility you feel like a whipped cur, to use your vivid phrase."

"What even for a few minutes? Just time enough to nip down the landing ramp?"

"We could do it, I suppose. But I want this body in good shape—"

"I'm just a host stud, you incubus!"

"Walk slowly, now. Your face is exactly that of a man who just went through. You felt the change? Right. Now take it slowly, my impetuous young hot-head."

Carson walked steadily towards the exit valves. He knew that Sandoz had changed his face to that of a man who had recently entered the ship, and who was wearing clothes near enough his own to attract no attention. The man, he hoped, would be busy hunting up the friends he had come to meet. Carson walked on.

Because this spaceport was so dreadfully familiar—a twin to the one back home on Ragnor—Carson's first glance went towards the far edge of the field. There lay the rusting heaps of metal, the corroding piles of ancient ships that had made their last planetfall here. Somewhere over there, clambering with arc cutters and nimble fingers among pitiful remains of once-proud ships, would be a spaceship breaker's boy. Who he was made no difference to the nostalgia flowing through Carson.

So short a time ago, he, too, had been just a de-gutter of wrecks. Working close to the field like this might bring in only the small wagons, not for them the deep-space liners sold off by the star-shiping lines, but it made for variety and experience and a skill with tools.

"*Cobwebby memories*," Sandoz said.

And Carson laughed.

He headed straight for the post office. The place lay cool and shaded beneath a bright sun, glints striking cheerfully back from polished brass and aluminium, plastic windows gleaming and reflecting green and scarlet and yellow blossoms growing luxuriantly in painted window boxes. The clerk was a white-haired lady with a gentle face and clothes fifty years out of date, her fingers stained, her eyes a bird-bright blue.

"*Only one sun, I observe*," Sandoz said.

"*Yvette's memories are not going to be much good*."

"*No. What do you want in the post office? We have to buy the clothes and belongings you need that we had to leave behind on the ship . . .*"

Carson answered by filling in a spacegram form. The lady smiled sweetly as she read it and franked the right amount. Carson paid.

The gram said: "Captain Mike Jose, GG HQ, Perivale. Having fine time. Saw you on tv. Keep the ball in the air."

The lady prodded with a finger. "Glad to know you're having a good time as soon as you land, son. But aren't you going to sign it?"

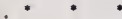
"No. Costs extra. Anyway, they'll know who it's from."

She smiled and slid the form into the mouth of the transmission robot. Carson smiled back, thanked her, and walked out.

"Now," he said firmly. "*We find a hotel after you've given me the face and figure we need, I have a good meal, then we go see Mrs. Duclos. And Miss Pepper.*"

"Yes. *I don't want Lys to get too far away. She finds communication a little difficult with the cat's brain. Carson—I mustn't lose her again!*"

"*You won't, Sandoz. Not if I can help it!*"



Chapter Six

The sign, neat and unobtrusive in leaf green lettering set in translucent lime green plastic, read :

DUCLOS AND NEHRING
REAL ESTATE

Carson swivelled his head upwards. From the opaque door beside which the neat little sign proclaimed the business carried on here, a six foot diameter transparent tube rose two hundred feet into the warm air. The tube vanished into the central boss of a round platform something over a hundred yards in diameter. The metal base absorbed light and the round blackness seemed to Carson to squat against the sky like a hole in heaven. Although he could not see the sides of the structure from his position immediately beneath its centre, by casting his eyes sideways along the rest of this street he saw other circular platforms all connected to the ground by their transparently shining umbilical cords. Some supported mere three storey buildings, other platforms contained skyscrapers of twenty and thirty storeys. He knew enough already to know that the Duclos building would be the largest and most impressive in Brubeck.

Here on Jazzstar towns were merely centres for spaceports and services. No one lived or worked in a town. The whole population was migratory. A town consisted of a spaceport or airfield, essential services, and a forest of tall transparent tubes equipped with express lifts. That was all.

He'd left Morton by aircar the morning after his arrival on Jazzstar, following Mrs. Duclos and her cat, Miss Pepper. The Duclos building in Brubeck, a quasitown five hundred miles away across flat treeless country, had just engulfed Mrs. Duclos, Miss Pepper, the nurse and a robot attendant loaded with baggage.

"Y'know, Carson. I feel sorry for that woman. Her husband is recently deceased and now she returns from a holiday on Shyrane—where no doubt she hoped to forget some of her sorrow—without her daughter. You mortals suffer in that respect."

"Shall we follow straight away? You've given me the face and figure we think proper, our story has been polished up—and there's no time like the present."

"Very well. If this man Nehring adheres to Jazzstar custom he'll up anchor soon and let the drifter go with the wind. The sun is almost down from here."

Carson called the elevator. Riding up, he said : "*An odd custom. Living in giant platforms like floating cheese boxes, drifting with the winds around the planet, always in daylight. No wonder Yvette thought there were a lot of suns. She'd probably never seen night time from a planet until she hit Shyrane.*"

"*What dark mysteries of psychology does this habit conceal?*"

"*You name it. They've probably got it. Ah, here we are.*"

A profusion of luxury surrounded him, even here in the foyer, and he guessed that the higher in the building he progressed the greater the opulence would be. Already he was learning what possession of great wealth could mean. The robot receptionist ran trillingly through its paces and Carson found himself ushered respectfully into an inner office hung with rich draperies and lit by a ring of drifting fireflies endlessly circling the junction of ceiling and walls. The formfit adjusted snugly to his new body and fingered secretly and with satisfaction the brand new and very expensive clothes he wore. The best part about money was spending it.

"Mr. Nehring is engaged at the moment, Doctor Waring." The man sat plumply and pompously behind his desk, steepling his hands, beautifully manicured. His moon face smiled blandly, his pomaded hair shone. "I am Alec Wolgast, vice-president. Can I help you?"

"I must confess," said Carson in what he hoped sounded like a deep and resonant professorial voice, full of years and authority, "that I am much impressed by your drifters. Jazzstar, as a planet, I did not anticipate finding of great interest ; but I was wrong."

"Good of you to say so," burbled Alec Wolgast. He remained politely smiling, waiting.

"I have come to you because I was told that Duclos and Nehring owned most of Jazzstar—"

Wolgast moved his hands as though washing them. "Not owned, doctor ! We have, shall we say, a greater interest in this planet than any other—"

"And anyone else," Carson said, perversely determined to raise some other reaction than bland courtesy from that face.

"That maybe. I understand you are an archaeologist, doctor. This puzzles me. Jazzstar is a virgin planet—"

Sandoz said : *Good grief, as you might say, do they really believe that ?*"

"Have any expert and detailed archaeological explorations and digs taken place?" Carson pointed a finger in a class room mannerism. "Not one. Only a rapid and sketchy preliminary summation by a not-very-skilled branch of the Survey Corps."

Wolgast broadened his smile. "All this may be true, doctor. I'm afraid all this digging up the past goes right over my head. Now—just how can we help you?"

"Why—I'll need to rent a drifter and to have your permission to carry out a dig. The land is Duclos and Nehring property—"

"Ah! I see. I don't anticipate great trouble there, doctor. Of course, Mr. Nehring will have to make the final decision. As to rents—"

"Anything within reason," Carson said, trying not to sound like a man who has a friend who can production-line manufacture precious gems.

A hush phone extended on its pseudopod from a recess in the desk. Wolgast spoke briefly, nodded, and looked across as the hush phone disappeared.

"Mr. Nehring is free now. The business has had a rather trying time lately. Mr. Duclos . . . But I know Mr. Nehring will want to deal with this personally." Wolgast stood up. "Will you come this way, please?"

Going across the lush carpet to the rear door, Carson was struck by the conviction that Wolgast only half believed his story. The smooth man would charge the limit for an archaeological dig and the drifter. The academic Doctor Waring must be backed by some wealthy and influential body prepared to pay heavily for the privilege of digging on Jazzstar, that was why Carson, as Doctor Waring, was receiving the red carpet treatment.

"Ah!" said Sandoz with satisfaction. "*Lys is very near. Mrs. Duclos—*"

The door opened. Carson went through.

"*Mrs. Duclos and Miss Pepper are still here. That's a stroke of luck.*"

Wolgast introduced Carson to Nehring. The room was a replica in greater size and luxury of the other office. Through a screened-reeded window the sun lay as a red ball on the bar horizon. Gently, delicately, Carson felt a swaying motion tremble through the floor.

Wilfred Nehring was tall and gaunt, a thick shock of grey hair giving his face a precipitous look. His handclasp was firm and dry, skin rasping against Carson's university skin. He had a slight stoop, and his mouth and chin, square and roughened, dug down into his tie.

"Doctor Waring, this is a pleasure. Allow me to introduce you to Mrs. Duclos—"

"A pleasure," Carson said.

"Say something about the cat, imbecile !" Sandoz rasped.

"An Arcturan Siamese !" Carson knelt, touched the cat's fiery fur gingerly. The cat arched its back but Carson did not stroke it. That, to a Siamese, Arcturan or otherwise, was fatal, demanding instant retaliation.

Mrs. Duclos showed animation. "Fancy that now ! Miss Pepper has taken a liking to you, doctor. For any other person to do that is impossible, except me and Yvette—Yvette—"

"Please, Mrs. Duclos !" said the nurse, urgency striking through her soft tones.

"Of course, Moira. But it is difficult not to remember and to pine. If anything happened to Miss Pepper, now . . ."

Sandoz said : "*You realise, I suppose, that this drifter has just left the lift ? That we are now sailing before the breeze around the planet, following the sun ?*"

"Yes. The motion as we left was noticeable ; but right now we're as steady as a rock."

"They've cut in the motors and generated a stasis field around the buildings, stepped up the speed. Evidently waiting for Mrs. Duclos to arrive delayed them and they have to make up time." Sandoz finished acidly : "*I wouldn't like to find them stranded in the dark.*"

"What do you make of Nehring and Wolgast ?"

"Nehring seems a reasonable character ; his emanations show only a fiercely competitive business man who tries to play the game straight. I get a reaction towards Mrs. Duclos—"

"I suppose he didn't put old Duclos out of the way ?"

"Might have done. Doubtful on the strength of the personality I'm picking up. Wolgast is different. His emanations are as coiled as a Squeeb's—"

"Could he be a Squeeb ?"

"Now how the blue blazes do I know ?"

"Seems to me you're failing to understand a lot just lately. Lys ?"

"I suppose so, Carson, I suppose so. Just having her near me is a delirious experience and I tend to push aside lesser matters. I know you'll understand that. But, wonderful though this is, I wait more!"

"Not with a flaming cat you won't, chum."

"The problem would be solved by mere waiting. After a million years or so—one cat's lifetime is not so very long."

Mrs. Duclos and the two men turned to Carson as though suddenly contrite with realisation.

Nehring said: "I'm afraid the drifter has left Brubeck, Doctor Waring. We're on the fringe of daylight here and—although I know you outworlders find this difficult to comprehend—we find that uncomfortable."

"That is quite all right, provided you have accommodation for me. I anticipate problems with my workers over the dig. As soon as daylight begins to go they'll down tools and drift with the sunshine?"

"That's right, doctor, and I, for one, can't blame them. But, tell me, what do you hope to uncover on Jazzstar? The place was virgin when the first Earthmen landed."

Nehring ushered the party through into a lounge where Wolgast supervised the drinks dispenser. Carson sat down with a genuine grunt of relief. He noticed that the nurse, Moira, sat next to Mrs. Duclos. Presently the older woman took the nurse's hand, gripping it for comfort. Carson saw again the strong, well moulded body beneath the uniform of the Saint Alison Sisterhood, the calm, smooth face, the soft brown wavy hair. But he still couldn't envisage an emotional entanglement with the girl. The image of Lucy kept sweeping away every present picture of any other girl.

He began to talk, carefully, building up the idea of a dedicated archaeologist working on his own, very idiosyncratic and partially discredited, theory.

"I am sure that I shall uncover finds of the greatest value to science. Jazzstar has been populated before mankind came here. I intend to prove that a great race of people extended from star to star in the galaxy—"

"But, surely, doctor," Wolgast interjected, lowering his drink, his smile unaltered by a millimetre, "the human species is the first truly great interstellar culture?"

"Not so. However, when I have proved my point it will only emphasize mankind's present decline. The old Human Federation collapsed and at the present time we are fighting a desperate rearguard action against decay."

"The Statque are trying to stop that," Nehring said quietly.

Knowing he trod dangerous ground, Carson smiled and refused to comment. He turned the conversation to generalities and as the amiable chit chat flowed on and Sandoz left him in that frightful vacuum, tried to establish his image as the bumbling, not-altogether-with-us professor. How well he succeeded he didn't know ; but when at last, he was shown to a comfortable room, pleading tiredness, he had arranged for the hire of a small drifter and the rental of the area he wished first to excavate.

Sandoz was still off and away. No doubt Miss Pepper was having a respite from the alien entity dominating her brain.

Only one untoward incident marred the pleasure of his stay on the Duclos and Nehring drifter. On the pseudo-night before he took a flier to the location of the dig and the hired drifter, his room was thoroughly turned over.

"Wolgast?"

"That's right, dear boy. His peculiar emanations still choke the place."

"Well, he will have precisely nothing to reward him for his night's work ; but all the same it makes me mad. I've a good mind to poke him one—"

"Huh ! Remember, Carson, you have at the moment the body of a middle-aged man in not particularly good physical trim—"

"And I don't know it ! I'll be glad to resume my own shape. I'm sick of puffing and blowing."

The site they began to excavate, Sandoz assured Carson, had once been an arsenal fortress of the Rilla. "*Under here, deep below the detritus of the years, lies a stupendous complex of armoured fortresses. Geological upheavals have buried them ; but I'll guarantee that the Rilla built well enough for everything within the armour to remain intact. From a genuine archaeologist's point of view, young fellow, this is the dream of a life-time come true.*"

Carson did not reply. From the hired drifter's downward angled windows he surveyed the ground below, where a rolling, dusty grassland and clumped, dispirited trees, echoed his own

emptiness of feeling. He couldn't settle down. Sandoz' quiescent acceptance of the bizarre situation, the way in which the little alien calmly went about this puttering archaeological cover story, his willingness just to exist with Lys somewhere else on this planet, all combined to infuriate and depress Carson. He felt frustrated. Purpose suddenly had left his life. There was nothing now immediately to be striven and fought for, no plans to scheme, no enemies to overcome.

The mental craving for excitement fevered his spirit.

"I suppose I am to blame for that." Sandoz coughed dryly.

"If I hadn't wrenched you away from the geegees to follow Lys you'd be battling and swashbuckling away to your heart's desire."

"No, Sandoz! You, of all people, aren't to blame."

"Nice of you to say so, dear boy. But still—oh, I know you relinquished your claims to a special place in the geegees, turned down the chance H.E. offered you of becoming the Grand Commander in due course. But that was only a passing phase. I am convinced that had you remained with H.E. and been surrounded by Guard panoply—and very direct purpose in the lights of a human being, too—you'd have taken that course destiny had ordained for you until I came along."

"Right. So I'd now be a strutting popinjay in the scarlet panoply of the Guard, learning to salute and polish buttons—thank all the patron saints of space you did come along, Sandoz!"

The wry amusement in Sandoz' thought brought relief and a saving humour to Carson, as the little alien said: "You are going to live for a very long time—by human standards, that is; and all your lifetime will be a whole lifetime to me, also. There is time, my impetuous young swashbuckler, for Lys and me—and for you and the Guard."

Below their hovering drifter which, sustained by antigrav motors regarded with tolerant amusement by Sandoz, hung a hundred feet in the air stationary against the breeze, a work crew laboured over the dusty ground. Already they had cut investigation trenches through the crumbly soil and Carson, putting to use his recently acquired book-learning, began to direct detailed efforts over the drifter's loud-hailers, Sandoz, of course, provided the brains and knowhow.

"Last time I had an archaeologist as host was, let me see, about twenty-five or so million years ago. Big chap. Very gentle and a nice creature in his own culture—but you'd see him as large as a diplodocus, Carson, eating a whole plateful of new-born—well, they were not unlike sheep—for breakfast. He wasn't

being cruel ; that was the way of life on Szinkul. He was digging up remains of some folk who'd lived only about five hundred thousand years before. I couldn't help him, though. At that time I'd been away on another spiral arm of the galaxy."

"Methods changed much?"

"Not really. Except that they lifted as much earth in one go as your whole crew take an hour to shift."

"Well, you said we mustn't use machinery ad lib!"

"Quite right. I want to know everything that has happened on Jazzstar since the Rilla were here."

"Well, frankly, I'm past caring. I want some action!"

"You young colts are all alike. You can't sit still and watch what goes on. Oh, no. You have to go out and do it yourselves. And get bloody noses in the process."

"You poor old codger ! Too old and tired—"

Sandoz' thought blasted through what Carson had been saying, ripping through his brain like liquid fire.

"Carson ! Blank off your thoughts ! Quickly ! Stop thinking !"

Without question Carson tried to do the notoriously difficult task of unthinking. His mind iced up. He felt streamers of thought probing at him, questing, prodding, prying. His hands gripped into fists. His teeth clamped into his lip. How long he stood there looking down through the window he did not know.

Then : "All right, Carson. Panic over."

"What the blazes was that all about?"

The answer sprang harshly and uncompromisingly from the alien mind. *"You human beings are further along the road of technological psychiatry than I had imagined. Someone has been searching with a—well, I've known them termed mind-seekers. An instrument that can blank off nearly all static and overtones and pick up the electrical impulses from an intelligent brain, record and codify them."*

"That sounds quite a trick—"

"They've fused the principles of an electro-encephalograph and a maser. I think you broadcast enough for them to pick you up. Somewhere on this planet there now exists an electrical recording of the signals from your brain."

"Statue or Guard?"

"Could be either, dear boy." Sandoz resumed his usual manner. "Whichever it may be, you're in for that action you

craved just now." That dry, sardonic chuckle: "*I hope you enjoy it.*"

"Yes, but—" Carson felt apprehension breeze over him, "*won't they see something odd about my brain signals? Won't they find a double record? Won't they register you?*"

"My dear young imbecile! You saw me, you picked me up. How do you think I could contrive the master-strokes of original thought and encompass my memories—even with those portions of your apology for a brain that I use as storage cabinets—and perform the prodigies of science that I do with such a small brain? I do not use your simple electrical cellular-system—no, dear chap, the prying fingers of the mind seeker cannot pick me up."

"Egotist! Anyway, it's a good job they can't."

"Indubitably."

"Anyway, you're so all-fired clever, why can't you blank off my thought transmissions for me?"

"I can, up to a point. A lot depends on just how strongly you are radiating and how near and powerful is the mind-seeker. I don't think we need worry too much at present. But—"

"We've got to stay near Lys. That's settled."

"Yes. But I don't want to get you killed to satisfy my love life, Carson."

Carson made no flippant answer to that. It struck too deeply.

Chapter Seven

Life drifted along with all the excitement of a clerk totting up a column of figures. Days on Jazzstar lasted for ten of Ragnor's days and Ragnor's, Carson had often been told with the pride of the good citizen, were almost the same as those of the fabulous Earth.

Each night the workers, most of them on holiday and here only because digging with an archaeologist was a novelty, packed up, caught their fliers and headed for drifters following the sun around the planet. With the dawn—ten of Ragnor's nights later—the turned up from the opposite direction. Inevitably, personnel working changed as men and women grew bored with the task, their holidays closed, other commitments drew them.

Here on Jazzstar people lived a free and easy life, not bothering with formality, happy to go along with what the day might bring.

"Probably," Sandoz said once to Carson, "they began their sunny migrations because they couldn't stand such a long night. It works out."

"Yes, but," said Carson, "forever drifting around the planet, never anchored in one place long enough even to know it. The conception of factories and foundries and offices forever drifting is acceptable, I suppose. But the inefficiency in mining, heavy engineering, industries which you just can't uproot, is fantastic. There are plenty of facets of this culture you can like and admire; but you have to shut your eyes to a great deal of business waste."

"As to that, dear boy, Duclos and Nehring own most of the planet. It's their worry, and they grow fat on it."

Four times in the next two of Jazzstar's days the mind seeker groped for Carson's brain radiations.

He studied each new group of workers to the site, wondering if one of those cheerful, laughing, skylarking sensation-seekers had been planted there in cold-blooded scheming by the Statque. So it was that he rebuffed attempts at comradeship. Some of the workers, unused to his rigorous discipline in the dig, packed up and left. Some left because he'd rubbed them up the wrong way.

Towards the close of that Jazzstar day he went down into the excavation. Earth lay heaped up on all sides revealing more earth below, with tractor and shovel men giving precise instructions to the robotic machinery, which carried it out even more precisely. Shadows lay long. Soon everyone would down tools and leave aboard their drifters.

"Hey, Doctor Waring! We've struck that metal—"

Instantly, Carson joined the group by the patient robot excavator, and stared down. Below his feet lay the corroded, battered, but still intact sheet of metal that the instruments had predicted would be there. What might exist beneath that sheet of armour plate the instruments could not say.

Incredibly to the jaded Carson, excitement flowed through him.

"Can you cut through?"

"Can but try . . ."

Six hours later, with the shadows now at their limit of tolerance the men gave up.

"Never cut through that before we have to move on."

Frustration tore through Carson. Bored he had been and, just when it seemed something out of the ordinary might occur,

the damned night clamped down and work stopped. He did not entertain the idea of cutting through himself. He nodded and the men left.

Aboard his drifter he found a message waiting. It was from Mrs. Duclos.

"I'm so sorry, Doctor Waring, not to be able to accept your kind invitation to come out and see your work. But I have decided to take another trip. I must try to forget the pain of loss. I know you will forgive me." Then : "I'm sure Miss Pepper remembers you. She ran about in a very agitated way when we began to pack. I always say animals are just as intelligent as humans, don't you think ?"

"*The course of true love never did run smooth,*" Carson said phlegmatically as their flier spun away from the spindling transparent tubes of Brubeck, heading after the Duclos entourage on its way to Morton. In this precipitate dash lay a ghastly reminder of their wild flight to catch the ship on Shyrane. This time Lys guested inside a cat instead of a mentally crippled child and if the images she received and relayed were more clear, they suffered from lack of comprehension and interpretation.

At the field the Duclos destination was easy enough to spot. A stubby, twenty-year old space liner reared from a side pad, the only ship currently on the field.

Enquiries elicited the dismaying fact that the ship had been fully booked for a star-gazing jaunt through the galaxy. She was licenced to carry a thousand tourists, her port of origin parsecs away and at this stop-over on Jazzstar Mrs. Duclos and Moira, her personal nurse, had completed a full booking. Sunshine beat down vertically on the heads of the returning tourists as they swung up in the ship's loading elevator, shining on souvenirs and wide hats and controlled suntans. Carson stood by the open window of the booking office, fuming.

"Now what ?"

Sandoz said : "*We must resort to a little skullduggery. Interesting word, that. Applied to me it is hilarious—*"

"*Lys is going aboard that ship. We can't. And all you do is make nitwittish remarks about words—*"

"*Wait, my impetuous friend, and watch. And, remember, I am sorry about this.*"

Carson saw a young couple waltz in from a hired flier, loaded with souvenirs, laughing, chattering, start to go through to the next group waiting for the loader. He felt an abrupt vertiginous sensation, a burning in his eyes, a dizziness and a weakness of his limbs. He rubbed his eyes; but before he could angrily question Sandoz he saw the young couple halt, stare about, their faces lose colour. Then they crumpled to the ground. Attendants ran up. A sympathetic stir animated the waiting passengers.

It was all over very quickly. An ambulance took the stricken pair to a drifter hospital. Carson returned to the window.

"You can book me in now," he said. "I'm sorry about those people; but they leave a vacant berth."

The robot ticket clerk re-acted on command and Carson paid and picked up the ticket folder. As he turned to go Sandoz said firmly: "*Blank, Carson!*"

Carson blanked; but his mind, whirling with the implications of what his alien guest had just done, would not still and his half-suppressed thought: "*You fixed that couple! You used my brain and you did something to them!*"

"*Quiet, Carson!*"

Desperately, knowing that a mind seeker groped remorselessly for the radiations from his brain, Carson tried to still his mind's activity.

Then: "*All right, son. It's gone. But they picked you up then, loud and clear.*"

"*That means they're near?*"

"*Yes.*"

Through the frame of the loading bay the stubby starship stood up, firm and patient, waiting to take men and women back into space. The talk and laughter of happy holidaymakers echoed and tinkled all about him. He walked out into the sun-splashed air, stepped aboard the loader, was whisked up into the ship.

"*Who would have thought,*" he said fretfully, "*that sticking close to a blasted cat would be such a problem?*"

Standing just inside the tennis courts, Carson watched idly as Moira, Mrs. Duclos' nurse, fought out a tough set point against a wavy-haired, square-jawed, clean-cut young Apollo. Mrs. Duclos sat beside him, Miss Pepper curled at her feet.

"I like to see Moira enjoying herself," Mrs. Duclos said comfortably, taking another chocolate from the box on her ample lap. "I'm afraid I'm a burden."

"That's what she's paid for," Carson said unheedingly.

"I know, doctor ; but she's been a good friend to me. I need someone older, really, though ; someone to take the place of my poor husband."

"Watch it, dear boy," said Sandoz gleefully. "*This routine extends back into the Galaxy's past far beyond my recollection.*"

"Sadist !"

"And, really," went on Mrs. Duclos, primping her hair with red-tipped fingers, "I'm not really old ! It's just that I've, well, let myself go since my poor husband, and Yvette—but this holiday will make a difference, I'm sure."

Sandoz said : "*She's certainly changed since we first met her. New hair style, make-up, smart clothes, and a fresh construction of body-armour-plate to arrange her shape into that considered most pleasing to the male eye—and that means me, my dear boy, as you must realise.*"

"You're looking wonderful, Mrs. Duclos."

"Oh, Doctor ! But why don't you call me Mimieux ? So much less formal." She raised her good-natured, plump face to glance coyly at Carson. "After all, you did follow me on this trip, all the way from your precious dig."

"Yes," said Carson, and felt the howl of laughter from Sandoz ringing in his brain.

"Poor woman," Carson said savagely. "*What would she say if she knew the man she thinks of as Doctor Waring had followed not her charms ; but those of her cat !*"

Moira cut a vicious backhand chop into her opponent's forehead, catching him wrong-footed. He flung his racquet into the air and caught it. "You win !"

Carson let his mouth droop. He'd never played a game of tennis in his life. As Moira and her beaten Apollo walked across, laughing, flushed, racquets across shoulders, Carson rose and excused himself. He left the courts and headed for the ship's library. Sandoz huffed a little ; but Carson said : "*Unless Lys decides to kill Miss Pepper right now, and then gets into Mrs. Duclos or Moira, we're safe for a bit.*"

"Carson !" Sandoz said angrily. "*Neither Lys nor I will kill our hosts ! Such a thought is an affront !*"

"I'm sorry. But waiting around a rich widow is a dangerous occupation."

He turned into the doorway leading to the library fast, needing quiet and solitude, a time to plan. With his mind

churning over the problems that appeared without solution he scarcely saw where he was going. The lights glinted from flame hair. He felt his own body collide with a soft but firm form that bounced away with a gasp. He looked up, the apology rising quickly to his lips.

He looked at the girl. She had one hand out, supporting herself against the wall. The other hand brushed a tendril of glorious flame hair from her forehead. Carson looked. He saw her face. Red roaring madness choked down over him ; all his surroundings whirled impossibly about him in that hammer of blood through his veins, everything but the face and figure of this girl looking so steadily back at him.

"Lucy !" he said, and the word tore at his throat, hurting him. "*Lucy !*"

He felt Sandoz pull him up with a jolt. He stared more closely at that lovely, white face with those enormous eyes, that soft mouth, that flame hair, seeking hungrily—then : "No ! No—it's not Lucy. It can't be ! Lucy's dead."

The girl smiled unsteadily.

"I'm sorry," she said with Lucy's voice. "I wasn't looking where I was going—"

"My fault," Carson said. "Please forgive me. But . . . But . . ."

"Yes ?" Her face, open and sincere and unafraid, drew him hopelessly. "What is it ?"

"Nothing. I thought—I thought I knew you."

Looking greedily at this girl he realised for the first time that Lucy's eyes had been set too close together. And there were other things, small, miniscule constructions of face and figure, that made him feel a traitor to the memory of his lost love. This girl far surpassed Lucy in the things in a woman that Carson wanted as Lucy had surpassed all others.

"You're sure you're all right ?"

"Of course. Stupid of me. I apologise—"

Sandoz snapped testily : "*Carson ! Stop acting like a love sick calf ! She's the same age as you, or thereabout. I'd guess she's nineteen. She sees you as a poor middle-aged old codger, ready for the grave !*"

"*This damned body !*" flared Carson. "*I'd forgotten !*"

The girl favoured Carson with a smile that rocked him back on his heels. "My name's Sally King—you're Doctor Waring, aren't you? One of the men who came aboard at Jazzstar? You were lucky, I thought we'd taken all berths."

"That's right, Miss King. Have you been around space much? That is—I—" He hesitated, wanting to ask her if she'd ever been to Ragnor and yet shrinking from committing himself. Passengers gossiped, it was their consuming passion.

"Oh, yes. Quite a lot. My father's—ah—job takes him all over our part of the Galaxy."

"That must be interesting. Is he aboard?"

"Of course not!" She laughed and Carson's head swam. "But I expect I'll be meeting up with him. Now I must go for my daily swim." She moved away with the grace of a panther. Carson watched her. This was Lucy, come back from the grave—only better, finer, even, than Lucy had ever been.

"*I gather you don't want a report on her, Carson?*"

A stab of panic hit Carson. Perhaps there was a flaw in this gorgeous girl? "*We-ell—*" he said, doubtfully. And, then, indignantly: "*You can report on her all you damn well please, you alien blob of gunk ! I know she's perfect !*"

"*Oh, well,*" sighed Sandoz. "*That settles the next host for Lys.*"

"*What? But—but—*" Carson babbled in his mind, now, overwhelmed by the vision conjured up by Sandoz' simple words. "*But you can't arrange that ! Suppose she's married, engaged—suppose she doesn't like me? You couldn't condemn a girl to that sort of fate ! I won't have it, d'you hear?*"

"*All right. All right. You've plenty of time to get acquainted. A whole cat's lifetime.*"

"*Listen to me, Sandoz. I'll only agree to Lys entering her and of the four of us having kids if she—Miss King—really wants me herself, without coercion. Got it?*"

"*You're the one who's got it, dear boy.*"

Carson knew that was right. No time at all had been needed for him to make up his mind. He felt that this girl and he had been made for each other.

Chapter Eight

Sitting down in the library and setting up his instructions on the dial operating the ship's limited but adequate reference section, he wondered yet again at the startling similarity between Sally King and his lost Lucy. But Sally won out on every point. A warmth engulfed him at the idea, a feeling that he could never be a traitor to Lucy and that she, wherever she was now, would understand.

The desk reader lit up and a magnified page of an encyclopedia unrolled slowly.

Razzee. Carson read. The foot long flying snake found only on Marjoram VI was sudden death. There were not many of them. Work on them had been limited by difficulties (see Marjoram VI, Galactic Gazetteer) but it was known they could breath oxygen.

Carson dialled for the Galactic Gazetteer, Marjoram VI.

Marjoram VI. Carson read. Galactic co-ordinates, mass, albedo, magnetic poles, escape velocity, gravity, various dimensions, inclination. Atmosphere—a mixture of gases in proportions . . . chlorine . . . Central tropical belt dominated by lantern flowers, carnivorous bells on long stalks . . .

Carson stared unseeingly as all the information reeled past on the reader. He was back in that lantern plant with the slosh of acids beneath his spaceboots, waiting for death, death through slow assimilation by the plant or the poisonous green gas outside.

"So we met on Marjoram VI," said Sandoz.

"The Quicktrip door on Ragnor was set to Marjoram VI when I went through. Yet the Guards said it was thrown at random when they checked. This means—"

"This means that the murderer of Colonel Stacey unloosed his razzee from Marjoram VI, going and returning from the planet through the Quicktrip door."

"This may be old history now," said Carson, the dull rage in him battling his warm memories of Sally King. "But I'd like to find out what really happened back there."

"So would I, son—but—Lys is calling! She's faint; but there's trouble there. Something's wrong!"

Immediately Carson cancelled the reader, sending the information back to the ship's library, and rose, going out the

door faster than he had entered. Around him the pulse of holidaymaking shipboard life carried on, people laughing and talking, having fun, relaxing. The tension built up in him fast. Sandoz smelt trouble—and that meant a real bonanza of grief.

"*Our aims are changed now, Carson,*" Sandoz said crisply as they hurried down the shining corridor to Mrs. Duclos' cabin, where Lys said trouble was brewing. "*I recognise that, even if you don't.*"

"*Why? We've got to help Lys out—*"

"*I don't mean this immediate problem; but the whole overall picture. Our task was to stay near enough to Mrs. Duclos and Miss Pepper so as to be on hand when the cat died and Lys passed on to another host. Now we have to consider Miss Sally King.*"

"*Yes. Of course. You mean we have to arrange for her to be around when Miss Pepper does die? That could be years ahead. Sally might be anywhere in the Galaxy.*"

"*It's our job to make sure the two are together!*"

Carson fully understood the reasons for Sandoz' concern for him. Those reasons stemmed from the same symbiotic root that bound them up together. But, all the same, he relished the warm feeling they gave him.

He slowed his quick walk as shadows moved outside Mrs. Duclos' door. Then he shrank back, feeling the revulsion and anger building in him.

"*Those two men—Squebs! Simon and Mark! The two who shoved me through the airlock!*"

"*We'll deal with those gentry if we have to. I can always make them sick like that unfortunate couple back on Jazzstar; but that, I'm sure, wouldn't hold such tough characters as these. Lys says that Mrs. Duclos has been taken away by a couple of men—but, dear boy, they cannot be these two here.*"

"*On guard, I'd say. What about Moira?*"

"*Lys says—now that is most interesting—*"

"*What does she say, dodderer?*"

"*She says, my gullible friend, that Moira appears to be on the terms of greatest amity with the Squebs.*"

"*The swine got to her when they picked her up back on the spaceliner. She's working for them—but—but this means they must have suspected all along!*"

Sandoz' dry chuckle sounded eerily in the recesses of Carson's skull. "*Evidently.*"

"What's happening? Did they say where they were taking Mrs. Duclos? And—Sandoz—they must connect the intrusive Doctor Waring with Arthur Ross Carson. They must! Although how they imagine I escaped from their push into space I can't imagine."

"Just a minute. Yes—Lys is lying down by the table and Moira and this man are discussing plans. They know it's you, Carson! They're going to bring you to the cabin—"

Over the loudhailers peppering the ship the announcer's modulated voice said politely: "Will Doctor Waring please go to the cabin of Mrs. Duclos? Doctor Waring to cabin Seven-Six-Three."

"Yeah," said Carson viciously. "Will the fly walk into the spider's web!"

Up ahead in the corridor the two Squebs, Simon and Mark, as though the announcement had been a signal, turned and entered Mrs. Duclos' cabin. The shutting door was the only sound.

"Lys is going to try a diversion. She's—"

"What for? I'm not going through that door!"

"No. I don't think that would be wise. But if you don't, the position will be a stalemate, to use a quaint phrase from one of your quaint Earthly games."

"You don't seem bothered."

"No one's around—"

Carson felt his face begin to writhe. Stiffly, he waited. Presently, Sandoz said: "You are now a handsome man of twenty-five or so, with features quite unlike your own or Waring's. The clothes—"

A voice, high and panting from the corridor behind them, swung Carson around.

"Doctor Waring! Don't go in that cabin! Quick, come with me!" Then, as Carson turned fully around: "What the—! I'm sorry—your clothes . . . I thought you were Doctor Waring."

"Shut up, Carson!" Sandoz blazed the warning.

Sally King gazed in bewilderment at the body and clothes of Doctor Waring and the face of a complete stranger—a man whose face even Carson didn't know.

"I beg your pardon—have you seen Doctor Waring?"

"You're Sally King," said Carson, exploring this new angle.

"No—I haven't seen the doctor here." Sally must play a part in all this intrigue, then—well, he might have expected that.

"He mustn't go in that cabin! Listen—I don't know who you are; but you must help me. There is a gang of ruffians aboard and they mean to kill Doctor Waring . . ." Her voice trailed and she stepped closer. Then her face relaxed and she put a hand on Carson's sleeve.

"I don't know how you've done it," she whispered. "The disguise is amazing. But I recognise that small stain on your tie—I've been trained to spot details like that. Come with me. Your life depends on it!"

Feeling as he did about Sally, Carson couldn't hedge.

"What do you know of all this, Sally? They're Squebs in there. You know that meddling with them isn't healthy."

"Are you going to come away or do I have to use this?" She took a tiny needle gun from the baggy pocket of the ivory casual jacket she wore over her tennis kit. "I'll explain as we go. Oh—and don't think I won't use this. I will."

"*Now's no time to argue with force majeure,*" said Sandoz irritably. "*Go with her, Carson. I don't want you knocked out at this stage. I'm worried about Lys. She's going to do something damned stupid in a minute.*"

"*Swearing with earthly swear words at your age, Sandoz. Really.*" Carson smiled brightly at Sally King and went with her up the passage. The needle gun maintained a steady bead on the small of his back.

"D'you mind telling me where you come into all this, Sally?" said Carson, turning his head.

"In time. Right now I want you at the airlocks to meet the ship I'm expecting in exactly one hour. The flaming squebs struck as soon as they were sure. They've been tinkering with their blasted radio-encephalograph until they were sure. And you had to come waltzing aboard at Jazzstar advertising to the world just who you were."

"Just who I am!" Carson said. "Well, Sally, who am I?"

Her reply shocked him as though she had struck him with five-fifty volts A.C.

"You? You're the poor fish I'm going to marry."

A deep welling spring of pure delight pulsed upwards in Arthur Ross Carson. A sensation as though all the daffodils in the universe had bloomed together, as though all the birds of

Creation sang only for him—and Sally. A tremendous feeling grasped him and tinged everything with rose and silver and gold.

"As to that, Sally, I want to marry you with all my heart and soul. But—but—"

"You sound like an out-of-phase motor! Look, just button up until we're safe in a lifeboat, will you? Those Squebs play for keeps."

Alarm pricked Carson. "You want to wait in a lifeboat. A ship, you say, is coming to take you off. And you intend to take me with you? So we'll leave this ship and all aboard?"

"Of course. The Duclos mean nothing to you. Do they?" she added, suddenly sharp.

"Say, *not a thing*, Carson."

"Not a thing."

"Very well, then. Come back to your friends."

"And how is H.E. these days?"

"He'll be a darned sight happier seeing you again—alive and well. You can wipe all that plastic and paint off as soon as we're in the boat. I want a good look at my intended."

Walking obediently with that paralysing needle gun at his back Carson went through deserted corridors, up to the boat deck. Sally held the gun in her sagging pocket, smiled sweetly, as they passed couples fast-locked in amorous embraces in the shadowed spaces beneath the airlock valves.

"At least, we won't have to go through all that," she said. "But you've led me a dance, I can tell you. I stuck to the darned Squebs and they led me to Jazzstar. I knew they had a radio-encephalograph on you and I must confess I was surprised you'd lasted so long. We were all sure they'd kill you in nothing flat."

"They tried."

"When they booked for this tourist's nightmare I booked, too. The Duclos seemed the only connecting link. Of course, your spacegram to Mike Jose helped, too."

"I hope he's keeping well."

"He is. He'll be aboard the ship we're awaiting."

"And then we depart at high speed for other regions of the galaxy?"

"Too right."

Carson made up his mind. He loved this girl. He knew that, knew that his love for her outshone his love for Lucy as

the sun outshone a candle. But—but there were other values in the scale besides his own happiness.

"I can't go along with you—"

"You can forget all that. Don't you realise just who you are? The galaxy needs you. The whole crazy erection is tumbling into ruin, it needs a strong hand at the helm. The geegees are trying to underpin the structure and the Statque are trying to hold it where it is, which means that they're back-peddalling as fast as they can. We need you, Arthur Ross Carson. I need you. You and I were destined for this—"

"You and I?"

They had stopped before the valve of a lifeboat now and Sally was operating the manuals with practiced hands. She turned to speak; but Sandoz' thought blasted into Carson's brain.

"You think you're dealing with a temperamental female, Carson! Lys is a thousand times more headstrong than your Sally—I told her we were leaving and that I had to go with you otherwise you'd be killed. I promised to keep in touch with the ship, trace her through on the planet Mrs. Duclos eventually reached."

"Sandoz—but!"

"But she won't have that. Oh, no! She insists on coming with us. And—and—she is hard to read—there is confusion—she is attenuating—she has scratched the man—Moirra is screaming—Lys—Miss Pepper—the man is going to shoot the cat—going to shoot—Lys! LYS!"

Chapter Nine

Presently, Sandoz said with a thought-stream that sounded weak and fragile: "*I read nothing from Lys. Nothing at all.*"

"But she can't be killed, can she, Sandoz?"

"It is very unlikely. But if one of my people is not prepared for a sudden flare of lethal energy, the life processes can be halted and, in extreme cases, death may result. I wish I knew what was going on back in that cabin . . ."

"Well, she'll probably try to get into Moira, won't she? We'll have to go back. We'll—"

"We will not go back, Carson. To do so would mean your death. Oh, I could climb into another body and find Lys; but I'm incapable of allowing my host to throw his life away for me."

That dry cough. "*Perhaps Lys will be forced to stay in Miss Pepper's lifeless body for a time. It may not be convenient to transfer . . .*"

"What," said Sally King crisply, "are you standing there with your mouth open and your eyes glazed for? Waiting for pay-day?"

"Look, Sally, you won't understand this. But—"

"~~You—will—not—throw—your—life—away!~~" Sandoz' command struck into Carson's brain. He shook his head savagely.

"*I'm in command of my own destiny!*" he said vehemently. He was aware of the pathetic stupidity of his actions, now; but for the little alien the bond of symbiotic friendship—more than friendship, a relationship closer than any he could establish with Sally—could find an outlet only in the way he wished now to act.

"Inside," said Sally, the invitation underlined by a casual flick of the gun.

"Go on, Carson!"

The steel alloy of the rail bit into Carson's fingers. His face felt damp with sweat, his throat scraped raw dry and his hands slicked wetly on the metal. He felt like a man climbing out of the buoyancy of water into the trifling support of air. He knew without a doubt that Sally would shoot him, paralyse him with the drug in the needles in the gun's magazine, haul him aboard.

He put a foot on the first rung.

"H.E. would throw a dozen blue fits if he could see me now," Sally said, the triumph in her voice filling Carson strangely with pride and sorrow. "I was supposed to meet up with you and lure you away by vamping you. And you turn up disguised as a fusty old professor of archaeology. A good cover story that, I'll say that for you. But—" the gurgle of laughter in her throat hurt Carson. "How could a girl my age vamp an old codger like you?"

"You'd be surprised at these old 'uns," remarked Carson, stamping over the airlock rim, clanging down into the lifeboat's dark interior. "*Sandoz, what's happening to Lys?*"

"*I don't know. There is nothing. Just a blank.*"

Sally prodded Carson gently but with firm purpose through the lifeboat's airlock, past rows of seat bunks, through the oval hatch leading on to the pilot's compartment.

"We wait here until I get the signal." Expertly she switched on the little ship's radio equipment. The frying-pan hiss of static echoed in the dim cabin. Only a few lights gleamed above instruments; Sally's profile showed, milky white, a little flushed against the shadowed darkness. "H.E. won't be long."

The waiting stretched. Carson sat, watching Sally, wondering about her, daring to dream of what might be.

She sensed his eyes on her, smiled and tapped the gun significantly.

"I said I'd use this, and I mean it. Why don't you clean all that gunk off your face. I want to see the man I'm expected to—well, enough of that when we're out of here."

Unhurriedly, Carson stood up, walked off into a dark corner. He stood there. "*Will you change me back to Arthur Ross Carson, please, Sandoz? I rather want to be myself again.*"

"Of course, dear boy."

The change, when it came, writhing his features, pulling at muscles, straightening his back, filling out his chest, brought a deep sense of well-being and comfort. The blood beat more strongly through his veins. He breathed more evenly, deeper, stronger. His vision cleared.

"Hell! I'd forgotten what it was to be young!"

"Nothing from Lys—"

Carson didn't answer that, didn't even think about it, wouldn't let it brush his consciousness.

He went back to Sally.

"There, Miss Sally King," he said. "Now you can see me for what I am."

Sally looked at him for a long time in the dimness of the cabin. Her eyes gleamed with glimmering moisture.

"You're you, all right. You—and more of you than I had imagined. You never knew your father and mother? Well, for that I feel sorrow; not to know one's parents is a sad, an almost irreparable loss."

"And yours?"

She smiled. As always, Carson felt as though someone had jolted him up the spine with a well-aimed boot. "I thought you'd have gathered that by now. How do you think I was able to keep on your track—why would I want to, anyway?"

"The Guard pay you for your work."

"Oh, sure, the geegees pay me—indirectly."

"I prefer—now—to call them the Guard."

She smiled and this time the mischievousness of her smile dimpled her cheeks and curved her lips so that she appeared a small girl planning monkey business.

"I have the privilege of calling them geegees."

"Really? I thought only blues called them that. The only man I know who has the privilege of calling the Guard geegees is the Grand Commander, H.E. himself."

"That's right. The only *man*."

"What? But—you mean—"

"Didn't you know what H.E.'s name was? I thought you'd have known he is Ross King—"

"Ross King!"

"He's your great uncle, once removed—and my father."

Carson began to see daylight now.

"And you were a part of this diabolical scheme?"

"Hardly diabolical. You wound me, deeply."

"What part was yours? Delilah?"

"Naturally. Although H.E. didn't just decide that as I looked reasonably vampish I would do to ensnare you. You were bred to take over the geegees, make them into an instrument to bring the human portion of the galaxy back on to the road of progress again. You could do it—by God, Arthur Ross Carson, you're *going* to do it!—but, any ruler must have a dynasty to follow. And he needs a mate fit to stand up to him in every possible way. So I was—well, frankly the idea disgusted me at one time—I was bred to be your partner."

"And—and our children—?"

"*They'd* be the great ones of the galaxy!"

Cynically, shaken by her calm acceptance, Carson said: "I'm surprised H.E. didn't throw you at me as a bribe when he tried—"

"You do him an injustice! This thing, between you and me, had to come on its own. If we hadn't got on—"

"Do we?"

"You make it hard, I admit. But you said—you said that—" And she could not go on, all her hardboiled toughness melting under the memory of Carson's hot words.

"If I was bred for this," Carson said in wondering understanding, "Poor Lucy! Of course I would be attracted to her—she—"

"She just happened to be like me, that's all."

"That's all."

Now Carson understood the gawky embarrassment that had roughened the contact of these two. No wonder—born to live and love and beget children in a grand design formed so that humanity might continue among the stars, only by a miracle could they hope to retain an identity, a precious affection untainted between them.

Slowly, he said : " I meant it, Sally. I do love you—I'd love you if your heredity was as black as the Coal Sack. If we live through this I'm going to marry you. And it won't be because the high brass in the geegees require it, nor for our children, big-brains though they may be. It'll be for us !"

She touched his shoulder with a different finger. Carson lifted his arms. She leaned forward, moist lips slightly parted, eyes misted with anticipation.

" Carson ! I'm reading Lys ! She's garbled and faint—she's only using a part of her host's brain and he doesn't know she's in him—"

Abruptly snatched back into the galaxy that contained death and destruction and the reality of an alien entity living in his brain, Carson snapped : " *He ?*"

" The Squeb thought Moira was double-crossing him. He shot her. Then Lys got into him—Carson, she's in a Squeb !"

" Holy cow !"

" Hey ! What the blazes is up ? Aren't you going to kiss me ?"

" Sally—Sandoz—Sally, my darling—you may never understand this ; but—"

" Carson ! You must go with this girl ! I insist ! I must wait for Lys—"

" Another million years ? No, Sandoz—think, man ! With Lys in an agent of the Statque their power will be immense ! We might not be able to beat them ! Then of what use will be the old scheme with Sally and me ? No, Sandoz—there is another way !"

Without thinking of what he was going to do, trying to beat both Sandoz and his own fears, Carson flung the radio key over to internal. He yelled into the mike.

" Attention ! Message for the Squeb in cabin Seven Six Three ! The man you seek is in lifeboat—ugh !"

For Sally had put one strong arm around his neck and fairly dragged him from the set.

" You filthy traitorous swine !" she screamed. Her face twisted into a hateful grimace and her gun swung up, pointing directly at Carson's heart.

"Just—a—minute, Sally !" he managed to gasp. "Hold it ! There's a reason—"

"There better had be ! My God—do you want the Squebs to kill you ?"

"*You utter imbecile, Carson !*" flared Sandoz. "*Now he'll come running and kill you and Sally—and what good will that do me ?*"

"*I'm not going off without Lys,*" Carson said stubbornly. To Sally he said aloud : "When he gets here, put a needle into him, fast. You'll be under cover."

"But, you dear idiot," she said, frantic, gun wavering. "Don't you realise as soon as he gets here he'll blast you ? There was no need—why, for God's sake, why ?"

"I promise you, Sally, you will know that after the Squeb is dead !"

The man got there fast. The airlock cycled pompously and unnecessarily in air and the inner swung open. Carson, sitting in shadow at the controls, kept his eyes on the oval door, his hands braced down to spring him in a wild leap away from the blast he knew would come. Sally stood, graven, beside the door.

A dark shadow bulked in the oval door. A blue gleam struck back from the gun. An instrument light tossed a shard of radiance full into the Squeb's face. Carson stared and the cry wrung from him shattered the waiting tautness.

"Alex Bors !"

The first bullet smacked sickeningly into Carson's left shoulder. His upward lunge collapsed sideways and the second bullet snapped past his head. The third slammed the breath from his lungs. But he was moving forward, head down, seeing only the image of Alex Bors standing tauntingly before him. A great scar glowed on the agent's face. His face glowered with brittle savagery now, far removed from his old subservient mask.

"You thought I died in that burning ship, Carson—well, I'm still alive ! And now I'm killing you !" The fourth bullet gouged deeply into Carson's stomach and he doubled over, retching, feeling no pain but only a great weakness.

Sally's needle took the squeb high in his gun arm.

"About—blasted—time !" said Carson and fell forward with raking hands. One clutching hand gripped Bors' still struggling figure. The man's gun arm remained frozen, out-

stretched in paralysis. Carson clawed upwards, felt Bors' left fist strike him across the temple. Sally fired again and missed.

"I can't shoot again—I'll hit you!"

Both men toppled to the floor. Sally darted to the controls, stabbed the launch button. The lifeboat shot from the swelling flank of the starship, hurtled into space. Airlock doors slammed shut on automatics.

"They were outside—I had to get away!" she called from the controls.

Feeling the strength ebbing from him, Carson battled that one-armed figure, sought to clasp a strangling grasp around the Squeb's throat.

"Hold him, dear boy! I'm dissolving the bullets as fast as I can, patching tissue . . . But it will take time . . . Hold him!"

The men threshed. Sally leaned forward, a hand striving to clutch at a part of Bors; but the Squeb thrashed and lunged, refusing to hold still so she could put another needle into a major nerve centre.

"I really messed this one up, Sandoz! If he gets the gun—"

"Fight him, Carson!"

From the speaker above the control board a voice rasped out.

"This is Statque patrol ship *Maintain*! Are you in command of the lifeboat, Bors? We know the story. We have contacted the starship. Come in, Bors!"

On the screen the shark-like shape of a Statque patrol ship knifed across the stars. Close. Sally spoke frantically into the mike: "Come in, Guard cruiser *Alamein*! Come in, H.E. for God's sake!"

The screen rippled with colour, coalesced into a ring of taut, hard faces staring out. Statque faces; men dedicated to keeping the Galaxy exactly as it was.

One said: "Agent Bors is there; but so is the boy Arthur Ross Carson. If a Guard cruiser is nearby—we have only one course left."

Another face said; "What of Bors?"

"He must sacrifice his life in order to maintain! Open fire at once!"

"You're going to die, Bors!" Carson screamed. He pressed upwards with all his strength, felt a surging power wash over him as Sandoz repaired the damage within him, "You're going to be murdered by your own friends!"

"But you'll go with me!" Bors said.

Sally flung herself upon the bodies of the two men. She scrabbled and fought trying in the dimness to find Bors from Carson.

Sandoz said with tremendous power: "*He must die at once, Carson at once!*"

Carson tried. He knew that thermonuclear warheads were speeding across space, aimed from *Maintain* unerringly to seek out and destroy the little lifeboat. But, something deep in his stubborn pride made him fight on.

He clenched his hands with the last feverish strength in him. He heard a snap. Sally's soft body sprawled all across him.

"This is the end, Arthur!" Sally shouted, her warm lips pressed against his ear. "I love you! *I love you!*"

"And I love you," Carson said, all sensation washed out of him.

For fractional moments silence hung in the cabin. His arms were around her; their bodies clung together.

It seemed wrong to Carson that he couldn't tell Sally with more cogency and force that he loved her. They were both to die in minutes: he had to make her understand that he was sorry for what he had done. But he could not find the words. He could only hold her hard against him, breast to breast, feeling the deep breathing life of her that would so soon be cruelly wrenched away.

And Sandoz?

"*I'm sorry, Sandoz—*"

Then the eruption of dripping scarlet and black caught and drowned him, flung him in atomised particles down a well of night.

Night. A great darkness shot with all the stars of space. A body in his arms. A slow gyration with all the stars of the universe extending from his body and glowing through his soul.

If this was death then the peace and comfort of it all after the strife was most welcome.

"*As I have said before, my dear boy, you seem to have a penchant for falling into the most impossible situations for an air-breathing, strictly planetary protoplasmic being.*"

"Sandoz! But—but that means—"

"Oh, you're not dead, dear boy, far from it. And the Guard cruiser Alamein is coming up, as you would say, hell for leather. We'll have to think up a good story to explain your living through a thermonuclear explosion."

"You brought me through that ! Incredible—"

"Oh, not really. Why, when I was guest in a member of the Starguild tribe we went right through a Rilla bombardment that tore the very fabric of the space time universe. That little thermonuclear pop of a moment ago was a mere nothing—"

The terrible relief burning through Carson suddenly turned ice cold.

"Sally !" He held her in his arms. Her sweet face pressed against his chest, her limp form slack in free fall. "Sally—oh, Sandoz ! I don't want to live with Sally dead !"

Sally moved, stirred in his arms, there in the cold hollowness of space.

"Fancy bending over near a pernicketty horse at my age,"

The words were Sally's ; but Carson heard them in his own brain.

"Sally !" he screamed. "Sally—you're alive—but . . ." Then he stopped shouting and quietened down. He smiled. "Sandoz, you cunning old codger, you—and how is Lys ?"

"She is in excellent form, thank you, dear boy. I am intrigued that communication is possible directly between you and Sally now that you both host one of us. Most interesting."

"Hey—this lulu of a baby in my noddle has been telling me all about it. Fancy you having Sandoz with you all the time ! No wonder you acted oddly."

Carson knew that Sally could accept the guest within her far more easily than he had been able ; she had the comforting assurance of direct communication with him, and the help and guidance of both Sandoz and Lys.

"And we survived through a hydrogen wallop !"

"Here comes Alamein."

"We're getting married right now. By the captain of the ship."

"But he'll want to give away the bride . . ."

"Doesn't matter. Right now we're going into the parental business—"

"Give it some time . . ."

"Time—Sandoz and Lys have been waiting a million years. Why should we stop them? Why should we make them wait any longer?"

As *Alamein* closed in, radar antennae picking up the remnants of the lifeboat explosion, the four of them hanging there in space burbled happily away. Communication opened easily between them. They felt right, a composite twosome that was really a twinned foursome.

Carson had the last word : *"I think between us we're going to sort the Galaxy out."*

They looked forward to that—all four of them.

—Nelson Sherwood

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The "goldies" were the only type of sentient life on planet Ecti, their discarded skins rare and valuable. Why, then, should someone want to kill a dozen of them ?

EARTHMEN, FAREWELL

by W. T. WEBB

Chapter One

The lettering on the green door read:

BERTHA VEYMAN

CHIEF SUPERINTENDENT C.I.D.

UNITED NATIONS CONSTABULARY.

Detective Inspector Kerry Knox of the U.N.C., with a quick glance at the familiar words, walked in without knocking. Kerry was a tall, athletic man whose tough, lined face, did not match up with his boyish crewcut. He had the cagey walk of a judo-fighter. And even here his habitual awareness did not relax. With his cropped head, seasoned face and tight-fitting grey suit, he looked more like a convict than a detective inspector.

Big Bertha Veyman, looking buxom and yet school-marmish, and with her hair pulled back into a thin, red ribbon, greeted him warmly and then paused to make a few re-arrangements to a desk-vase of yellow roses. Her high-necked blue dress with its white lace collar was a nice compromise between authority and femininity.

"And what's this about your wanting to retire?" she asked as though referring to some feeble joke.

"I want to retire, and that's all there is to it," Kerry Knox lowered himself into a chair and stretched his long legs towards Big Bertha's desk. "I've had enough police work. I'd like to settle down; do a bit of farming; maybe write a book about my experiences with U.N.C."

Big Bertha sighed loudly, heaving her bosom and pressing chubby fingers into her plump cheek.

"Detective Inspector Kerry Knox. 35 years of age, six foot two, lean, active, muscular, educated, highly trained in police work and in the arts of unarmed combat. In short an ideal policeman. And he wants to settle down; raise pigs and potatoes; and write yet another bad book about the U.N.C.!"

She stood up impressively and toyed with the onyx ring on her right little finger.

"Do you know how old I am, Kerry?"

"About forty-two," he said gallantly.

"Flatterer! I won't see fifty again—and well you know it. But I shan't think of retiring for another twenty years—at least!"

A petal fell from one of the roses on to the shining top of the desk.

"Everyone's entitled to his own ideas about retirement," Kerry said. "And personally I've had enough police work. I want to do something creative."

Bertha looked at him searchingly.

"And you think police-work is not creative?"

"I don't see how the detection of crime can possibly be creative. And I'd like to do something more with my life than trapping crooks."

Bertha's grey eyes narrowed. She looked down at the fallen petal and then raised her face accusingly at Kerry's.

"Well, it's a free world," she said at length. "Largely thanks to the efforts of the United Nations Constabulary we now enjoy a Free Enlightened Democracy. And if you want to retire half-way through your career no one can stop you." For a moment she gazed through the window at something a long way off. Then a smile came to her face. "An extremely interesting assignment has just come in—and at the moment there's no one else I can put on it." She looked eagerly down at some papers on her desk.

"Sorry I can't help you, chief." Kerry said firmly. "I intend to retire as from now." Somehow the note of grim determination in his voice sounded strangely off key.

"Very well!" The eagerness faded from Bertha's plump features and she sat down dejectedly behind her desk. From somewhere she produced a ridiculously small lace handkerchief. After dabbing her face with it, she brushed the fallen rose petal from her desk. Suddenly she looked tired and old. "I'm just a silly old woman," she said almost tearfully. "And if you won't take on the job I can't make you. You know that only too well."

Kerry Knox rose and stepped towards her almost belligerently. The United Nations knew what they were doing when they put women at the head of their departments. You could tell a man just what you thought of him. But with a women you either had to knuckle under or feel a brute. Free Enlightened Democracy they called it! Blasted petticoat government!

"All right," he said. "You win. I'll take on this one job. But remember. It's the very last. And another thing—please don't imagine I fell for that 'Silly old woman' routine!"

For a few seconds Big Bertha looked hurt. Then she brightened.

"I thought you might take on the job," she said after a pause. "So I took the liberty of ordering you a passage to Ecti. Everything's arranged. You leave from Shannon Spaceport at 1900."

Kerry rubbed his palms together.

"What's the job?" Some instinct told him it was going to be a tricky one. But then, most U.N.C. jobs were. The easy cases were cleared up on the spot by local security officers. Big Bertha gave him a motherly smile and coyly joined her fingertips.

"On Ecti, in 514 Sector, some creatures known as goldies have been killed. Twelve of them. We want to know who killed them, and why. If it's a case of wanton slaughter we want the culprit brought to justice."

"Goldies?"

Big Bertha nodded. "Goldies are possibly-intelligent bipeds found only in Marnforest in Northland on Ecti. That's where the fabulous "gluck" coats come from. Apparently the goldies periodically shed their coats in the

forest. Local Earth Government officials collect them and ship them to Earth where they fetch anything up to a million credits."

"Not each!"

"Yes, each. Someone has killed a dozen of these goldies—and your job is to discover who and why."

"A million credits each! What's the set-up on Ecti?"

Bertha tapped some papers on her desk.

"It's all down here. Briefly, Northland is Ecti's only habitable land mass. It is settled by an Earth Government Community under Administrator Baden Parfet; plus a number of private-enterprise traders, free-spacers, and prospectors. The Settlement has a fine kindergarten and hospital as well as excellent living-accommodation for the staff. Earth Government controls several mines and numerous large farms. Most Earth Government official travel is done by helicopter; but there is a first class, well-lit road through Marnforest linking the spaceport with the mines out in the desert. Most of the manual-work outside the Settlement is done by scads, the semi-intelligent slave-race imported by the free-spacers from Ecti's sister-planet Scadi . . ."

"Sounds a fishy set-up to me," Kerry said sourly as he took the spaceline ticket and the sheaf of papers from Big Bertha. "Why the devil didn't I insist . . . Oh, what's the use?"

Big Bertha smiled her tolerant, motherly smile as Kerry went scowling through the doorway.

Kerry Knox gazed through the port as Northland swung into sight. The polar mountains rose above a plateau which stretched southward to a vivid blue ocean. Several of the mountains were active volcanoes. Smoke and vapour combined in a tumultuous many-coloured cloud-curtain above a landscape of lava and snow. When the polar region had fallen behind it could be seen that most of the continent was a desert of yellow sand. At ground-level no doubt the desert would be ridged and duned; but from this altitude it looked as flat and smooth as a disc of amber.

A stretch of greenery lay below them now. A forest. Kerry's map called it Marnforest; and the ocean, Tropic Ocean. Marnforest grew on either side of what at first seemed a long, slender lake curved like a scimitar. As they approached, Kerry saw it was not a lake but a great crack in the planet's crust. The map called it Steamy Canyon.

Buildings appeared. A road from the desert bridged Steamy Canyon and led out of the forest to an open area beyond a line of low sheds. The spaceport. Beyond the port, a huge straggle of impermanent-looking buildings stretched as far as a crescent-shaped line of ocean-coast which the map called Electric Bay.

Half an hour later Kerry was carrying his suitcase down the ramp. He wondered if anyone among the milling crowds ahead had come to meet him. And what crowds they were! A gaudy, sleazy, smart, ruffianly assortment. The scads, mingling with the humans, could be distinguished by their shorter stature and their porcine cast of features. Grinning piggy-boys with ever-moving jaws.

Assignments on a variety of planets had accustomed Kerry to diverse spaceport conditions. But Ecti's arrival port, quite the least orderly he had ever seen, took him by surprise. Safety-precautions were primitive. Many of the free-spacer craft crowded indiscriminately on the landing-field would have barely qualified for the scrap-heap on any well-run planet. Apart from the universal electronic fire-arms probe insisted on by Earth Government in the drive to stamp out fire-arms throughout the galaxy, customs and immigration formalities were apparently nil. And the entire population seemed permitted to invade the spacefield.

Most of the humans wore tropical clothing. And the nearby palms and gaudy flowering trees had a tropical air. Kerry thought of Bombay and Colombo as he stepped past the landing-field barrier and pushed his way into the crowd. After the clinical air-conditioning of the Earth-ship, the tropical stinks were almost overpowering.

A few seconds after leaving the barrier he was approached by a tall, lean man of about thirty, with somewhat bulbous eyes and an expression of intense seriousness. He wore a semi-military uniform of soiled white drill with the three chevrons of a Supervisor on his shoulder-tabs.

"Detective Inspector Kerry Knox?"

"In person!" Kerry grinned, but his grin found no reflection on the lean face confronting him.

"I am Ralf Yailor, the Settlement Security Officer."

Kerry nodded. He had met these humourless, regimental types before. Spread throughout the colonised stars, they carried the Earthmen's burden like a load of burning ashes.

When they had shaken hands, Yailor beckoned a scad and told him to carry Kerry's suitcase.

"Yes, master."

The scad rubbed its snout. Then it grasped Kerry's case with a short, chubby hand that had only three fingers. Kerry hid his revulsion as he observed the little eyes, fleshy nostrils, and big curved mouth. These sterile hybrids were reared on Scadi and used by the local over-lords as beasts of toil. They practically lived on *plesh*, a drug made on Scadi from dung and seaweed. Free-spacers bought scads by the dozen and sold them where they could throughout the galaxy — a space-age slave-trade which U.N.C. was slowly stamping out.

"I've got a copter over at the heliquad," Yailor told Kerry. "I'll flip you to the Settlement right away." He turned to the scad porter who was biting into something like a dull green candy bar.

"Come on pigface! Put that *plesh* away and let's get going!"

The scad bowed quickly and gave a porcine grin.

"Yes, master!"

Five minutes later they came to the heliquad. The only machine parked there was a perspex bodied Robeson model with the Earth Government's cornucopia insignia on its side. As he was about to climb through the door, a woman detached herself from the crowd and said to Kerry in a voice which was almost hysterical:

"If you're going to Marnforest, citizen, watch out for the giant goldie!"

Kerry grinned and raised a hand to the cropped bristles on his head. But before he could say anything, the woman, who looked drunk, staggered back into the crowd. For a few seconds he watched her floppy blue sun hat as it eddied like a castaway blossom among a variety of colourful head gear. Then he lost sight of it.

"Giant goldie? What was she talking about?" he asked Yailor as they took their seats in the cabin. "She got a touch of the sun or something?"

Yailor scowled and pressed a lean thumb against the starter-button. "Superstition has it that a giant goldie lives in a sort of Ogre's castle in the desert near Marnforest. Actually the whole idea is a war of nerves against the

Earth Government Community. The local free-spacers based at Shedtown want to get us out of it so that they can exploit the planet unhindered. They plan to run the mines and farms by scad labour, and live the life of colonial aristocrats. But we Earth Government people are staying on. And one day we'll spread order and decency all over the planet. In due course we'll create here a Free Enlightened Democracy. At the moment, outside the bounds of the Settlement it's complete anarchy and gang-rule. You'll see for yourself before long."

"Have you any theories about the killing of those twelve goldies?" Kerry asked as they soared away from the slap-happy spaceport.

"It's all wrong," Yailor said, pointedly ignoring the question. "And no one at the E.C. Settlement will take any decisive action to put things right."

A kilometre south of Steamy Canyon, the Earth Government Settlement of chromium, glass and green gluestone, lay across the Marnforest Road like a six-bladed rotor. In between the long, shining buildings rose the heavily-fronded palms of the forest. It looked as though the building had been constructed elsewhere and lowered, all of a piece carefully between the trees.

Before landing, Ralf Yailor hovered over the hub of the Settlement and pointed to various sections.

"'A' Block to the left, and 'B' Block to the right, contain the dwelling-units. Down there lies the canteen, the galley and the gluck-store — where we keep the cast-off goldie-coats, known as glucks, until we get a shipload. The kindergarten is down there. Look, some of the kids are out playing. That's Admin-centre and Parfet's office. That's the Medical and Maternity Wing. And opposite we have recreation rooms, laboratory and transport section."

The Settlement revolved on its hub as the copter turned to land. Yailor brought the machine down neatly in the centre of the concrete circle. And a few minutes later, Kerry Knox was shaking hands with a military-looking man with a red face and a white moustache, hair and eyebrows. The face looked old, wise and very pleasant. And the figure below it, in the white trousers and the white open-necked shirt trimmed with silver, was as slim and agile-looking as a boy's. Of course, there were no aristocrats any more; but

this, Kerry thought, was how an old aristocrat should have looked.

"Administrator Baden Parfet," Yailor introduced. "Detective Inspector Kerry Knox of the U.N.C."

Kerry returned Parfet's formal greeting and then took a quick look round the encircling buildings and trees. Some children came running out of a doorway and stood looking at him with shy smiles. Most of them were the usual *café au lait* brown. But here and there an extra-fair skin or an extra-dark one served as a reminder that once the race had been divided into sub-races. Anyway, the kids looked well cared-for and happy, which was infinitely more important than the colour of their skin.

Presently a tall, slim young woman came out of a swing door to his left. For a moment she stood still, looking at the three men with a smile on her pleasant face. She wore a white lab-coat with the sleeves rolled to the elbow. Her hands, pushed deep into her pockets, gave her a tom-boyish naturalness of stance which was augmented by the casual way her short, brown hair was brushed back from her rather high forehead. She gave a little wave, and, with a smile towards the children, she hurried over to the men.

"Kerry," Yailor said, "this is our biologist Astra Harman."

Aministrator Parfet smiled and turned to face the girl. "Astra has volunteered to help with the enquiry into the goldie killings. She's rather fond of our bright-coated friends. But first we'd better show the inspector his room."

For some reason his voice reminded Kerry of Big Bertha Veyman's.

Chapter Two

Half an hour later when Kerry emerged from his room in "B" block he looked spruce and cool in a suit of spotless nylon. His tough face was freshly shaved. His short, wiry hair was still damp from the shower. He found his way to Admin Centre, where Ralf Yailor, Astra Harman and Baden Parfet were assembled in Parfet's office. It was a large, sunlit room opening off the Settlement hub. On the Administrator's desk stood two telephones and a radio

transceiver. Above the desk a coloured map of the Marn-forest area almost covered one wall.

"As you know," Kerry said without preamble, "I've been sent here to find out who killed the twelve goldies, and why. And if necessary to bring the culprit to justice. So now, with your permission, Administrator, I'd like to ask a few questions."

Parfet nodded his white head, and smiled urbanely.

"Go ahead, Kerry! Ask whatever you wish. Our own enquiries, conducted by Ralf here, have drawn a blank. But no doubt you have had more experience at this sort of thing. We don't get a lot of crime in the Settlement."

Kerry turned to the girl.

"Astra, I understand you are the biologist. Perhaps you can tell me something about the goldies without going into esoteric detail."

She glanced at Yailor, who was mumbling something about crime outside the settlement.

"So far as we know," she said, "the goldies are the only species of large land animal indigenous to this planet."

"So far as you know?"

"Yes," Parfet put in. "South of Tropic Ocean another landmass called, very unimaginatively, Southland, extends from just below the equator to the South Pole. It is a land of volcanoes and hot springs; and so far it has not been thoroughly explored. Consequently, there may be a considerable fauna there about which we know nothing."

Parfet smiled and nodded to Astra to go on. And she said:

"The goldies are the largest species apparently indigenous to Northland. They are very beautiful and mysterious creatures. They live, apparently, on palm leaves; and every two or three months they shed their coats, which we call glucks, much the same way as terrestrial snakes shed their skins. We gather these glucks as they shed them and ship them to Earth where they bring very high prices."

"What do they use 'em for?"

"Fabrics mostly," Astra said with a smile. "Women's coats and dresses. They make up into the most beautiful garments imaginable; and they have long been highly esteemed in fashionable circles."

"They are used also in spaceship construction," Yailor said sternly.

"So someone comes along," Kerry said, looking round at the others, "and slaughters a dozen goldies for their pelts. From what I've seen of that spaceport, the free-spacers could easily smuggle them off the planet."

Astra, smiling patiently, shook her head. But Yailor, jabbing out a lean finger, got in first with the explanation.

"No, Inspector: the coat of a dead goldie is virtually worthless. When the animal has been slaughtered the coat has no more value than a sheep-skin. It is only when it has been shed by the living goldie that it takes on the special colour and texture."

"Perhaps the person who slaughtered the creatures didn't know that," Kerry said.

Parfet smiled urbanely. "In that case it would be a stranger to Ecti. The people here, even the children, know all about the goldies; both in the Settlement and in Shedtown. And most people are rather fond of the creatures."

"Shedtown's where the rabble live," Yailor put in bitterly before Parfet had finished speaking. "You may have noticed the town of sheds and shanties to the west of the spaceport."

Kerry nodded non-committally. "Someone from Shedtown killed the goldies? Is that what you're suggesting?"

"But what would be the point of it?" Astra demanded. "The goldies are such gentle, lovely creatures surrounded by music and colours. They harm no one. They never stray on the farms or go anywhere outside Marnforest. All the time they are alive they keep shedding their glucks, which helps to bring prosperity to the planet. But once they're dead they're just—carriion. No one in his right senses would dream . . ." She turned away without finishing her sentence.

"Nevertheless, it looks as though someone did kill them," Kerry said. "Who else have you got here except the people in the Settlement and those in Shedtown?"

Yailor pointed through the window. Then he turned and jabbed a bony finger at the map on the wall.

"Earth Government administrates a series of mines out in the desert; and, nearer to the Settlement a number of farms. As well as the Shedtowns and the people here in the

Settlement we've got roughly four hundred miners and about two hundred and fifty farm-workers and their families. Then there's the fishing industry and an untold number of free-spacers, deserters, poachers, prospectors and general riff-raff. Not counting tourists, the human population of Northland is about 14,000. Then there's about 2,000 scads."

"And one or more of those humans—or scads," said Kerry, "seems to be guilty of killing a dozen goldies; just for the fun of it." He looked at Astra. "Do you think it could have been a hunter?"

"But why?" the girl demanded. "Why hunt down a dozen goldies? What would be the point of it?"

"At one time we had people like that back on Earth," Kerry said. "They actually killed things just for the thrill of chasing after them. Oscar Wilde called them 'The Unspeakable chasing the Uneatable'."

"But the goldies won't even run away from you," Astra told him. "If you come into the forest you'll probably see what I mean."

Away from the Settlement, Marnforest was hot and steamy. And there was a noticeable absence of insects and birds. As Kerry walked with Astra among the spongy-leaved trees, they disturbed small lizards from time to time. But by far the most numerous of the moving creatures were the snakes. Rainbow-hued and constantly moving, these threaded in and out of the heavy green foliage and often gave the impression that the trees were swarming with birds. On several occasions Kerry looked round expecting to see a bird and saw instead a small snake, as gaudy and lively as a kingfisher, glinting among the greenery.

"Any of these poisonous?" he asked.

Astra shook her head.

"None of the Northland fauna has been found in any way harmful. I suppose that is one of the reasons why the defenceless goldies have survived. Until the coming of Earthmen this planet must have been a Garden of Eden for them. We're probably the only predatory species they've ever encountered."

"What other vertebrates have you got here?"

Astra frowned thoughtfully. "Squamata only—snakes and lizards. Apart from the goldies, which are definitely mammals, Northland seems to be in the Mesozoic. That's if . . ."

"How did the goldies evolve then?"

Astra looked doubtful. "One theory is that they crossed Tropic Ocean many years ago; and came originally from Southland; but until Southland's been explored we can't be sure."

"Why hasn't it been explored?"

Astra pointed ahead to where a shimmering veil of mist was rising beyond the trees.

"Those parts of Southland which are not in the vicinity of active volcanoes, are like the bottom of Steamy Canyon, covered in geysers. So unless you want to be roasted in lava or boiled in water you—stay away." She gave a brief laugh. "Of course it could be explored, and one day it will be; but our main concern for the immediate future is the colonisation of Northland."

They fell silent as they approached Steamy Canyon. For a moment, Kerry stood on the slippery bridge, and grasping the hot handrail, tried to look down into the steam.

"How deep is it?"

Astra smiled weakly in the cloud of rising vapour. "No one knows for certain because no one has accurately sounded the whole length of it. The ordnance survey map gives the depth as 120 metres; but in places it's much deeper than that. There's a sort of legend that Steamy Canyon goes right down into the core of the planet; and another one that a race of salamanders live down there. It's remarkable how strange notions are generated and spread on a new world like this. They're equivalent, I suppose, to the old travellers' tales when Earth was largely unexplored. People see strange things and the most imaginative explanation gains acceptance until science comes along with something more authoritative."

They crossed over the bridge and walked clear of the steam. Kerry rubbed a hand across his bristly hair. He felt as though he had been in a turkish bath with all his clothes on. He was surprised that his white suit still looked presentable.

"Then there's the legend of the giant goldie," he said.

"Oh, you've heard that one already, have you?" Astra wiped her face and hands with a pocket handkerchief and then tugged a comb through her hair. "Actually there is

some justification for the giant goldie legend. The creature has apparently been seen by several sober farmers in isolated farms. And it's supposed to live in a structure called the Ogre's Castle, which stands out in the desert."

"You mean the structure really exists?"

"Oh yes; and it really does look like an ogre's castle. I suppose it stands about thirty metres high; and it's embellished with all sorts of turrets, towers and battlements. Perhaps Ralf will flip you out to take a look at it after dinner."

"Who built this—Ogre's Castle?"

Astra laughed. "That's another of the mysteries of Northland." She pointed to a small clearing covered with a plant like terrestrial parsley.

"This is where we found the dead goldies. All twelve of them had bled to death through a puncture in the main neck artery."

"Who found them?"

"Ian Montgomery, our Senior Bailiff."

"Had the killing been done by a knife, do you think?"

Astra stayed silent for a moment. Kerry watched her closely. It felt good to be with her, alone in the forest. He could learn to like her very much. Yet he reminded himself that he had come to Ecti to solve a mystery; and an emotional entanglement at this stage would not help in that task.

"Apparently a knife had been used, but when we found the bodies they had been dead three days or so. And, of course, in this climate we had to bury them as soon as possible. No murder weapon was found in the vicinity; and the only clue was a length of nylon rope, as though someone had roped them together before slaughtering them and then untied them afterwards."

Kerry watched a blue and yellow snake wind round a branch and then wriggle across a leaf, to disappear into the green darkness among a wreath of palm-fronds.

"Is it possible that they were killed by other goldies?"

Astra smiled. "Not in my opinion. But then I'm prejudiced. You see, I like the goldies and I just can't visualise them murdering each other. They seem almost like, well—angels. Most unscientific, I know. But I make no apologies. To me, the goldies seem a superior race."

"Superior to Man?"

Astra nodded slowly. "Yes, I think so. But we know so little about them. We don't even know if they have any technology. They may have erected the building known as the Ogre's Castle. But again we don't know."

"What do they do all day?"

Astra held one hand out as though lecturing at a blackboard. "Again, we don't really know. They seem to walk about, grazing now and then on the palm leaves. They don't seem to talk in the normal way. But you get the idea they are conversing. And then there's the music and the colours . . ."

"Go on," Kerry said gently.

Astra smiled a little self-consciously. "I'm hoping we shall meet some very soon and then you'll see what I mean. It's difficult to explain—but as the goldies walk about between the trees a sort of music goes with them. And all the time the air is subtly tinted with beautiful colours. The funny thing is that everybody can't hear the music or see the colours . . ."

"You can though?"

Astra smiled. "Yes, I can, and nearly all the settlement children can. We often bring them out here on picnics. But many of the adults can neither see the colours nor hear the music."

"Perhaps it's a question of wave-frequencies," Kerry said. "Most adults are deaf to the cries of the bat."

"No, I think it's something more than that," Astra said. "It's a question of sympathy."

"Although these goldies have no apparent technology, you think they are intelligent?"

"Definitely," Astra said immediately. "And I think their intelligence is on a much higher level than human intelligence. I've a feeling that they've passed through our stage of development many centuries ago. And now they have a sort of group-mind and . . ."

A sudden laugh in the forest stillness made Kerry look round. He saw a man and a woman coming towards them. The man, in his late twenties, was tall and slightly stoop-shouldered. He had dark, wavy hair and well-formed, masterly-looking features. And his face was distorted now into an expression of cynical derision. The woman beside

him was short, dark and extremely beautiful; a voluptuous nymph with sultry eyes and thundercloud hair. She wore the briefest of sunsuits made from near-transparent nylon. It was the man who had laughed. He came up to them still laughing and showing strong white teeth.

"This is Ian Montgomery and Eve Tasso," Astra said, indicating the two newcomers. "And this is Kerry Knox of the U.N.C."

They acknowledged the introductions with smiles and informal salutes. Eve oggled Kerry shamelessly.

"Astra's a great biologist," Montgomery said, still laughing. "But don't let her mislead you about the goldies. They are just animals with less intelligence than the scads. Don't allow their pretty looks to deceive you. All that's goldie is not glittering! You can think of them as two-legged goats with expensive overcoats."

"My main concern," Kerry said, "is to find out who killed a round dozen of them."

Montgomery shrugged. "In my opinion the question's of no importance. Twelve goldies get their throats slit. Well, who cares? There's no shortage of goldies. They probably breed like scads..."

"Scads are sterile," Astra pointed out.

Montgomery ignored her. "The number of glucks we collect won't be appreciably diminished. So why lose any sleep? If a couple of hundred goldies had been wiped out it would be something to shout about. But twelve! That's only a drop in the ocean."

Kerry noticed that Eve Tasso held something shining over one arm.

"Is that one of the glucks you've got there?" he asked.

Eve smiled and held it up in the sunlight. It seemed to be a lovely gold, yet, as she moved it, it sent out rays of blue, green and violet. When Kerry touched it, it felt quite cool in the heat of the forest. The texture was as fine as gossamer, chainmail by elfin goldsmiths fashioned under a misty moon... Yet it gave the impression of being as strong as thickest leather.

"The first I've seen," he said, scratching his bristles and looking a little awed.

Eve smiled seductively. But her voice had a babyish, plaintive lilt. "Each of these glucks is worth a million credits on Earth. And what do we get for collecting them? Twenty miserable credits a month. Now isn't that fantastic?"

Ian Montgomery broke in before Kerry could formulate a reply.

"We've got a tommy-truck in that next clearing," he said pointing. "Can I drive you back to the Settlement? It'll save you crossing Old Steamy on foot."

Kerry looked at Astra.

"No, thanks," he said. "Astra's going to show me some goldies before we go back."

"I simply hate walking over Steamy Canyon bridge," Eve Tasso said languidly. "It's bad enough crossing it in a tommy-truck. It plays hell with a girl's complexion."

Montgomery lowered his dark head and pointed through the trees. "If you want to take a look at some goldies there's a herd of them over there, strolling about as if they own the place. See you at dinner!"

"Be seeing you," Kerry said.

Eve Tasso waved the scintillating gluck at him and then walked off with Montgomery. She turned once and gave Kerry a smile over the sun-tanned curve of her shoulder. Then the pair of them disappeared among the palms.

The remarkable thing about Marnforest, Kerry realised as he and Astra moved in the direction that Montgomery had pointed, was the silence. He had been in many forests and jungles. And he had always associated such places with the loud singing of birds, the shrill cries of animals, and the persistent buzzing of insects. But here the silence was complete. The spongy leafmould swallowed their foot-steps like blotting-paper. The snakes flashed their colours in the foliage as soundless as earthworms in loam.

Then he heard the music. Faint and sourceless. As though the molecules of the air had begun dancing of their own accord. He looked at Astra. She, too, was listening. Kerry followed her gaze, and saw them. The goldies!

He halted in awed amazement. Now he knew why Astra did not believe the goldies had killed a dozen of their own species.

"Can you hear the music?" she asked softly.

"Yes."

"And can you see the colours?"

He certainly could see the colours. The flashing, glowing, constantly changing colours that surrounded the lovely creatures as they moved gracefully through the trees. At first he thought there were only one or two of them. But, looking closer, he saw a great multitude, walking slowly yet full of vigour, transfiguring the palms with their colours, and mingling their individual tunes into a mighty symphony.

Astra smiled. "You will understand now why no one would be likely to kill a goldie. Even cynics like Ian Montgomery are pretty awestruck when the goldies are near. The children almost worship them."

When the multitude had passed into the green twilight, Astra walked forward and lifted a gluck from the ground.

"I'll take this along to the gluck-store before one of the poachers grabs it. Tomorrow the Earthship will be calling for a consignment of glucks."

"A million credits worth," Kerry said, touching the gluck. "And someone has killed twelve of the geese that lay the golden eggs! It couldn't have been a bunch of scads, I suppose?"

"No, the scads have a built-in inhibition against violence."

Kerry nodded thoughtfully. Earlier, the job on Ecti had been just another job—a job he couldn't avoid without displeasing Big Bertha Veyman. But now that he had seen both Astra Harman and the goldies he had acquired a personal interest in it. He was more determined than ever to find out why twelve goldies had mysteriously died.

Chapter Three

Dinner at the E.G. Settlement was an informal affair. Members provided themselves with food at the service-table and carried it to one of the smaller tables. Kerry noticed with a grin of approval that while the tables down the centre of the dining hall had each been arranged to seat half a dozen, there were tables for two in the alcoves round the walls. And most of these smaller tables were already occupied by courting couples.

Following Astra, he carried his tray to a table where Administrator Parfet was sitting with Ian Montgomery and Eve Tasso. Eve had changed her sunsuit for a yellow sarong which set off the dark beauty of her eyes and hair. Parfet, his white hair and moustache neatly groomed, continued to look stately and authoritative in a white nylon shirt and trousers.

Presently they were joined by Ralf Yailor, the lanky security officer, who still wore the soiled uniform he had worn that afternoon.

"I was telling Kerry about the Ogre's Castle, Ralf," Astra said when Yailor had taken his seat. "How would you like to flip us over to the desert after dinner to take a look at it?"

Yailor nodded. He turned his serious looking, slightly bulbous eyes towards Kerry. "If you like I'll show you quickly round the whole of this sector of Northland. We should be able to see most of it before sundown."

"Fine!" Kerry said.

"Not that there's anything worth seeing," Eve Tasso opined with a quick glance towards the U.N.C. man. She looked over at Ian Montgomery and they exchanged knowing smiles.

"Seductive little bitch," Kerry thought. "She's got Ian where she wants him and now she's trying to add me to her list. I wonder how many more she's got?"

Parfet, with a fastidious gesture, broke some bread.

"Have you made any headway with your enquiries, inspector?"

Eve Tasso was looking at Kerry now. So was Ralf Yailor. They had both stopped eating.

"I've got one or two ideas to work on," Kerry said. "But it's too early yet to say anything definite."

It was a stock reply and all of them knew it. Kerry wondered if Parfet was really concerned about the killing of the goldies or if he shared Montgomery's indifference.

"How long do they give you to clear the case?" Montgomery asked conversationally. Kerry glanced round the room. Most of the tables were filled now. Men, women and children. All living under the protection of a government many light-years away. One of them could be guilty of the killing.

"As long as I care to ask for," Kerry said to Montgomery, "but I think I'll finish here in a day or two. Whoever killed the goldies must be crazy; and a crazy person should not be hard to find."

First he must find a motive, he told himself. This was no ordinary killing. But even a crazy man had a motive of some sort.

"You should interrogate Donovan in Shedtown," Ralf Yailor said, avoiding his eyes, but before Kerry could reply, Eve Tasso broke in with:

"And then I suppose you'll be going back to Earth. Aren't you lucky to be seeing the last of Ecti?"

"And what's wrong with Ecti?" Demanded Astra, immediately on the defensive.

Eve shook her dark, lovely head.

"If you don't know, sister, I certainly can't tell you." The words were spoken flippantly, but Kerry detected a deep longing on Eve's part for the overcrowded cities of Earth. He wondered why such women ever came out to the stars.

"Ecti's a fine, new planet," Astra said, "and we've got a unique opportunity to fashion it into a really lovely world."

"We won't do that as long as the place is overrun with scads and shedtowners," Yailor protested. "Donovan's only waiting for an opportunity to attack the Settlement and kill off the lot of us. Including the kids."

He pointed to a riot of laughing children playing tag round one of the tables. "We ought to be making plans now to take over the whole of Northland and clamp it under Earth Government control."

"And what good would that do?" Parfet asked calmly. "We are not perfect here, I agree, and there are many things we would like to see improved. But on the whole progress is satisfactory. Slowly but surely Northland is getting settled. More land is coming under cultivation. More minerals are being extracted from under the desert. Wealthy tourists keep visiting the planet and so do freespacers. Many of them settle down in Shedtown, it is true. But we in the Settlement are continuously receiving new blood. We can't expect to reach overnight the civilised standard of a Free Enlightened Democracy. But it will come."

Yailor raised a long, lean finger to his right shoulder tab. "It would come quicker if we took over completely."

"I don't agree," said the Administrator. "These things must be done gradually. You can't enforce civilisation. It must be allowed to evolve by natural stages. Once we make Northland an Earth Government monopoly with full customs and immigration formalities, the tourist ships and the freespacers will simply stop calling and we shall become an isolated world with the population of a Terran village."

Yailor fisted the table. "Better live in isolation than with the abomination of Shedtown on our doorstep."

Kerry looked from one to the other. In such a small community the conflicts were necessarily close to the surface. Conflict between Eve, who yearned to go home, and Astra, who aspired to create a new world; conflict between Parfet, who wanted to build a prosperous world, and Yailor, who insisted on an orderly one: Had some conflict such as these caused the death of the goldies?

"Who is Donovan?" he asked.

"Donovan?" Yailor gave a bitter shout of laughter. "Donovan's the man who rules Shedtown. The man who'll soon be ruling the whole of Northland if we don't watch him. Donovan's a gangster and a killer. He's the man behind the wholesale gluck-poaching."

Kerry saw Eve Tasso and Ian Montgomery exchange meaningful glances, and Parfet carefully lay down his knife and fork. He sensed that the conflict with Donovan was more deadly than any of the others. A conflict which could drastically alter the history of a world.

"Gluck poaching?" Kerry enquired.

"Donovan's men steal a few glucks now and then," Astra said. "They sell them to the free-spacers. Donovan would probably attack the Settlement if we relaxed our vigilance. But all of our active adults are organised into defensive squads. If ever he did attack he'd get more than he bargained for."

Kerry turned to Yailor. "Why doesn't someone arrest the man?"

"Because of Earth Government's policy of laissez-faire," Yailor said defiantly.

"As a matter of fact," said Parfet, "In spite of all the rumours, we have no evidence against Donovan. If someone brings me evidence I'll have the man arrested."

"He's too clever for that!" Yailor growled. "If I had my way we'd arrest him first and find the evidence afterwards." He glanced at his watch. Then he said to Kerry and Astra, "Come on, you two, if we're going to see Northland before dark we'll have to get moving."

The glass and chrome of the Settlement gleamed in the evening sun. Marnforest spread green and thick on either side of Steamy Canyon. The copter flew eastward over the forest palms. Beyond the forest a patchy scrubland belt extended a few kilometres to the first of the farmlands. Here terran sheep and cattle grazed. Save for the domed, prefabricated buildings and the absence of trees, the scene might have been mistaken for a part of the terran countryside somewhere in the temperate zones.

"At one time the land here was all scrub," Astra said, pointing down through the perspex body of the copter. "And now we've got 10,000 hectares producing Earth-type grass and clover."

"Some going!" Kerry remarked.

Astra pointed over Ralf Yailor's shoulder at the yellow terrain towards which they were heading.

"At the moment we've only touched the fringes of it. Over there lies an area as vast as the continent of Africa—completely desert."

"You've got mines out there," Kerry said.

Astra's eyes burned with enthusiasm. "Yes, and one day we'll have farms out there. Meadows, homes, schools, villages and little towns. Enough to absorb a considerable portion of Earth's surplus population. When you go back to Earth, tell them that, Kerry. There's enough land here for millions of families to live in comfort and plenty in a brave new world."

"The Ogre's Castles down over there." Yailor said in a bored voice.

Kerry looked through the perspex and saw nothing but dull, yellow sand. The farmlands were well behind them now; and ahead the sand, yellow and featureless, stretched to the curved horizon. Then he caught sight of something that looked like a giant yellow glove, or a gauntlet, reaching upward from the desert floor. A gauntlet with four long fingers. As they sailed closer details showed up.

It was apparently some sort of building. A closed door the shape of an elongated ace of diamonds could be seen at the base of it. And as the copter circled round the building Kerry saw the diamond motif repeated numerous times. There were diamond-shaped windows and flying-buttresses, and diamond-shaped trellis-work balconies linking the finger-like towers.

"What's inside?" Kerry asked.

"No one has yet been inside," Astra told him. "Three years ago we had a group of archeologists here to examine the thing. But they were not even able to get the door open. They couldn't make head nor tail of it. One said it was a tomb. Another said it was an ancient spaceship. And a third said it was a primitive idol. And so on. The only thing they could all agree about was that the structure was built by intelligent beings. Which of course we knew already. They went away quarrelling over their different theories and promising to come back later. But we've never seen them since."

"And what's your theory?" Kerry asked.

Astra grinned. "I suppose my theory is as good as any of the others. I believe the goldies built it. I believe the goldies do a lot of things which we don't know anything about."

"At the moment the Ogre's Castle is a tourist attraction," Yailor said humourlessly. "Seen enough of it for now?"

Kerry rested a hand on Yailor's bony shoulder. "Let's go to Shedtown," he said. "If possible I'd like to take a look at Donovan. Do you know where he hangs out?"

"Now, wait a minute!" Yailor said.

"He owns a dive called the *Pig's Ear*," Astra said. "We might find him there."

"Well, I'll take you there if you like," Yailor said with some reluctance. "But I warn you: Donovan's likely to cut up rough if he thinks you're getting too curious. He's the only law in Shedtown. And he never goes round without a bodyguard."

"He won't start anything in front of the tourists," Astra said.

Yailor shrugged as he swung the copter westwards. "I wouldn't put it past him. He's got no love for Earth Government, or the U.N.C."

The sun was setting as they hovered over Shedtown. Some ten kilometres west of Marnforest, and the other side of the space port, Shedtown was the original settlement built twenty-five years earlier by the Earth Government community. When the present Earth Government Settlement was completed inside Marnforest the sheds had been sold to free-spacers, independent prospectors, and miscellaneous adventurers—the lawless frontiersmen of Galactic colonisation.

Shedtown's population had multiplied. So had the buildings. Now a fair-sized town of prefabs, shanties, tents, shakedown and huts sprawled over the scrubland between the perimeter of the spaceport and the shore of Tropic Ocean—an abomination, or an exciting stamping-ground according to your tastes, your mood, or your political convictions. A haunt of scads, tourists, whores, playboys, gamblers, missionaries, social reformers, escapists, perverts, saints, political extremists, and religious cranks.

Tourists and playboys were attracted by the nominal freedom of the place. In Shedtown they were free to get as drunk as they liked. Free to partake of any narcotic they fancied. No vice or perversion was barred. They were also free to be robbed of their money, to catch the pox, to become hopeless drug addicts, or to die at the hands of a cutthroat. But they did not consider the less pleasant aspects of freedom as they filed out of the free-space passenger crates and scurried for the dives along the waterfront of Electric Bay.

The *Pig's Ear* was one of the least savoury of these dives. Kerry, Astra and Ralf Yailor called there after parking the copter in the nearby heliquad. The ramshackle den was packed with gay-clad tourists and bar-girls, with pig-faced scad waiters, and tough, bearded prospectors still grimed with sweat and desert sand. But the trio managed to find a table on a balcony which overlooked the dancefloor and at the same time gave easy access to the door.

Yailor ordered iced beer from a scad waiter. The security officer looked really worried, and Kerry wondered how far his anxiety was justified.

"If Donovan gets any inkling we're here there'll be trouble," Yailor said as the waiter padded over to the service bar.

"I thought you were the one who wanted Donovan arrested!" Kerry said.

"Yes, but not in here. My idea was to bribe one of his associates and catch him by surprise."

Kerry's contempt must have shown; for Yailor went on: "No need to look at me like that. When you deal with a rat like Donovan you use rat-like methods. The end justifies the means."

"Yes?"

"Yes; and whatever happens, inspector, don't get involved in any rough-house this evening. I know you U.N.C. boys like to show off your unarmed combat tricks. But they don't work here. If trouble starts we'll make for the door, with Astra in between us. And then we'll get to the heliquad as quickly as possible. Is that clear?"

"Sure."

Kerry looked round the low-ceilinged room. The walls were covered with crude, erotic paintings. A small stage, with a pianist furiously playing on it, leaned at the far end of the room. Above the stage hung a number of pennants bearing the names of spaceships whose crews had patronised the dive: *Waterloo*, *Bastille*, *Thermopylae*, *Potemkin*, *George Washington*, *Cervantes*, *Lucky Dragon* . . . Tobacco-smoke, sagging over the rowdy tables, carried the unmistakable scent of Indian hemp.

There was too much noise to distinguish the tune that the pianist was pounding out of his delapidated instrument. No one listened to it. But many of the tourists and prospectors kept turning round to the stage as though expecting some spicy performance at any moment.

Presently a scad brought three beers and glasses on a tray. With surprising dexterity it opened the bottles with its hoof-like three-fingered hand, and filled the glasses with beer. Yailor flung down a coin. "Keep the change!"

The scad gave a porcine grin and bowed low. "Thank you, master!" After dropping the coin into an apron pouch, it took out a stick of *plesh*, which it began to chew with obvious relish.

"Donovan's over there," Yailor said, looking slyly into his glass and pointing a big-knuckled finger across the room. "Don't look immediately. He's the big, red-headed brute with the artificial hand. That crowd of toughs sitting with him are his bodyguard."

After a quick glance at Astra, Kerry looked across the room. Donovan, from Yailor's description, was easily recognisable. Tall and hefty, with a craggy, scarred, bestial face and a matting of carrotty hair, he was conspicuously formidable even among the riff-raff that patronised the *Pig's Ear*.

He wore a loose-fitting green silky shirt open down the front to display a hairy torso. His right hand clenched into a fist which he thumped on the table from time to time as he harangued his henchmen. But his left hand was made of some flexible metal. And as he spoke the fingers kept opening and closing, bending forward and backward uncannily, as though the hand were an independent entity—a big, metallis spider with twitching legs.

Sitting beside Donovan, and almost dwarfed by his huge frame, was a dark, petite girl with long black hair. She looked about fifteen. Whenever Donovan glanced at her she smiled. But when he looked away her gaze darted quickly round the crowded room as though she was seeking some way of escape. Eventually she caught sight of the newcomers on the balcony. Kerry smiled at her, but she looked quickly away.

"Who's the girl beside Donovan?"

"I wouldn't know," Yailor said. "He's always got some young tart in tow."

Astra got to her feet. "I think I know her," she said eagerly.

"Sit down!" Yailor said, reaching towards her. "For God's sake, sit down!"

Astra sat down. She leaned close to Kerry. She was obviously less worried than Yailor.

"That girl is Rosa Dorn. We've got her young sister, Marta, in the Settlement Kindergarten."

"Rosa Dorn should be in the kindergarten herself," Kerry said. "Why doesn't she come to the Settlement?"

"Probably because she likes this kind of life," Yailor said contemptuously. "Some of them take to it like a scad to *plesh*!"

Astra chuckled. She gave Kerry a tomboyish grin. "I suppose it does have its attractions."

An expression of shocked prudery crimped Yailor's thin face.

"Astra! You shouldn't say such things. Inspector Knox will go back with the wrong impressions."

Still grinning, the biologist stretched her hand out and indicated the crowded floor.

"Face the facts, Ralf. One side of human nature craves this sort of thing. And a Free Enlightened Democracy must take that fact into consideration. Can you imagine a crowd like this at a Settlement concert?"

Kerry took his gaze away from the bigotted face of the security officer and looked across at the red-headed giant, Donovan. For a moment Donovan looked in his direction. Kerry caught a glimpse of him full-face. The insolent, bloodshot eyes, the wide, disdainful nostrils, and the trap-like sneering mouth, built up an impression of paranoid consciousness of power.

Where there is no law, Kerry reflected, such strong, ruthless and brutal men take command. Such were the kings of ancient times until, law, trade, religion and the militant people curbed their royal excesses. But, as Parfet had pointed out, civilisation had to evolve naturally. Just as the foetus must pass through the various stages of evolution, so must a society evolve from despotism to Free Enlightened Democracy.

"What's that Donovan's eating?" Kerry demanded. "It looks like—"

"Plesh!" Yailor said. "And that's just what it is. Scad-dope! He's the only human being I've heard of who can even smell a stick of *plesh* without vomiting. Donovan practically lives on the stuff, like the scads. Sometimes it makes him go crazy."

Crazy! Was it possible, Kerry wondered, that Donovan had slain the twelve goldies while under the influence of *plesh*? Having seen the goldies he was convinced that only a madman could harm one. A madman—or someone driven crazy by the loathsome alien drug, pulped by the non-human overlords of Scadi for their misbegotten helots.

Chapter Four

A sudden shift in the pattern of activity in the room took Kerry's mind away from the train of thought he had been pursuing. The pianist rose from his stool, leaned back against the piano and lifted his arms for silence. Then a man with the unmistakable aplomb of a compere strutted on to the stage with one hand fluttering in greeting.

"Our next little cabaret-turn, folks — wait for it! Is a display of the feminine female figure. A striptease tantalisingly served up to you by lovely young Rosa Dorn!"

Raucous and ribald cheers greeted the announcement. Kerry saw that Donovan's female companion had slipped away. Donovan, clapping his ill-matched hands, was looking towards the stage with all the brashness of a super-extrovert. While he stood clapping there, an unfortunate scud waiter chanced to come within his reach. Donovan, with a roar of laughter, lashed out with his metal hand, opening a vivid cut on the pig-man's fleshy cheek.

Ralf Yailor got to his feet. "Surely you don't want to witness this disgusting exhibition!" he said to Astra.

Astra made no move.

"Why not? After all I'm a biologist!" she laughed impishly.

Yailor, turning his back on the stage, sat down again and stared sulkily into his glass.

Kerry was conscious of Astra's amused gaze upon him as he watched the striptease. Really it was a pathetic little exhibition. Young Rosa had good looks and an excellent slim figure; and her long black hair had a beauty all its own. But she was obviously nervous, and quite untrained as an entertainer.

He was quite pleased when she took her final bow. For a moment she stood completely nude under the spaceships' pennants. Her head was bent low. Her long hair drooped down to her bare feet. She was so slim he could almost count her vertebrae. Then with a flash of heels and buttocks she was gone from the stage and the pianist resumed his energetic thumping.

Kerry waited for Rosa to return to her table. But instead of that happening, Donovan, at the head of his scowling bodyguard, got up from the table and left the room through a door marked Private.

"You can turn round now," Astra said goadingly. But the security man continued to look sulkily into his glass.

"One more beer," Kerry said. "Then we'll get out of here." He planned to come back later for a talk with Donovan. He'd probably manage better with Astra and Yailor out of the way.

When he glanced round for a scad waiter he suddenly saw someone he recognised walking across the floor. A dark-haired beautiful woman wearing a yellow sarong. Eve Tasso! He watched her covertly so as not to attract the attention of his companions. With an air of unconcern she went up to the door through which Donovan and his men had just passed and unhesitatingly stepped through it.

"What's happening now?" Astra enquired.

"I'm looking for a waiter."

"Here's one coming."

Kerry ordered three more beers. The scad brought them over from the service bar. But the drinks were never tasted. For just as the scad was leaving, a drunken prospector with a filthy, bearded face, avoided the scad and crashed into the table, sending the glasses flying. Yailor jerked to his feet.

"You clumsy devil!" he snarled.

And without a word the bearded man struck at him. Kerry felled the drunk with a casual rabbit-punch. Then three men stepped towards him. Three tall men in green shirts. Even as he felt in his pocket Kerry recognised them as members of Donovan's bodyguard. They made the mistake of getting too close together as they approached. Kerry took his hand out of his pocket and showed them it was empty. Obviously puzzled, the men verged even closer together. Then, with startling suddenness, Kerry sprang towards them with arms outstretched. He grabbed the two outer men each by an ear and brought their heads together, one either side of the man in the middle. He put all his strength into the move. The three men collapsed upon the body of the bearded stooge who had triggered off the trouble.

Kerry turned quickly. Yailor was halfway to the door. Kerry grabbed Astra's hand. "Come on!"

They caught up with Yailor as he was leaving the dive.

"O.K. Don't run!" Kerry said. "We'll just walk briskly to the heliquad. I don't think we'll meet any more trouble for a minute or so."

When they got to the helicopter with the cornucopia emblem on its side, Kerry waited for Yailor to climb into the pilot's seat. Then he helped Astra into one of the seats behind.

"Yailor, I'd like you to take Astra back to the Settlement and call back here for me in two hours. Wait for me if I'm not here."

Yailor looked scared. His eyelids moved up and down rapidly over his bulbous eyes. "Why? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going back to the *Pig's Ear*. I want a word with Donovan."

Yailor's lean face twitched spasmodically. The upper lip tightened back nervously over biggish teeth.

"Don't be crazy man; you'll get your throat cut."

"I don't think so, it wouldn't suit my hair-style."

Astra, too, looked anxious.

"I don't advise you to go, Kerry. Donovan's crazy . . ."

"That's why I want to see him. He may have been crazy enough to kill a dozen goldies."

"Listen Kerry," Yailor said. Then he stopped and looked at Astra. Kerry saw that Astra was staring intently over his shoulder. Turning, he saw a girl of about fifteen, with long, black hair, hurrying towards them.

"Here's Rosa Dorn," Astra said. "I wonder what *she* wants."

Rosa hesitated, looked warily behind her, and then ran the remaining paces to the copter door.

"Are you citizens from the Settlement?" she asked breathlessly. Despite the excess of make-up, her face, with its big, dark eyes, looked pathetically childish.

"Yes, Rosa," Astra said kindly. "Would you like to come back with us?"

Rosa shook her head. "No, I've come to warn you. Donovan is going to attack the Settlement tonight. You must get back quickly and warn the others."

"What time is Donovan coming?" Yailor demanded.

But the girl did not reply. She turned quickly, with a flurry of long, black hair. Then she began to hurry away in the direction from which she had approached.

Kerry watched her slim back and her long, waving tresses until they had vanished among the crowds. Then he stepped into the copter and closed the door behind him. "I've changed my mind about visiting Donovan," he said. "Apparently Donovan is going to visit us."

When they got back to the Settlement and gave the warning, Kerry had the opportunity to see Baden Parfet in a new role. Previously he had seemed a mild, gentlemanly old boy whose only desire was to live in peace. But now, as he sat at his desk issuing orders by telephone and radio, he showed himself a capable administrator.

Parfet radioed the mining headquarters, and the chairman of the farm community, explaining the emergency, and asking for assistance. After arranging for scouts with radio transceivers to patrol the perimeter of Marnforest and guard the gluck-store, he moved the invalids and old people into the kindergarten wing, where the children were already asleep in their beds.

Kerry, standing with Astra behind Parfet's desk, watched the white-haired administrator instruct his key personnel. The adults were divided into two squads, provided with radios and armed with truncheons. No. 1 Squad was detailed to remain in the Settlement while No. 2 Squad was sent out in tommy-trucks across the canyon bridge to the westerly fringe of the forest where the main road came in from the Spaceport. This was the spot from where the Shedtowners would be most likely to approach. The squad was to stand by with road-blocks.

Kerry and Astra followed Parfet outside to the wide disc of concrete which was the centre of the Settlement, from which the various buildings spread out like the spokes of a wheel. There were lights in most of the buildings and along the straight road that disappeared into the trees in two directions. Other lights hung like chinese lanterns among the heavy foliage. Overhead the stars gleamed bright and clear.

Framed in the doorway of the copter, Ralf Yailor stared through a pair of night glasses in the direction of Steamy Canyon.

"Get inside, Ralf," Parfet told him, "and man the radio. When the raiders are reported I want you to go up as an observer. No doubt Donovan is banking on a surprise attack.

When he sees us up and ready he'll probably head back for Shedtown."

"If you catch sight of Donovan in person let me know," Kerry said. "I want a word with him about the slaughtered goldies."

"How about issuing firearms?" Yailor said to Parfet. "You don't expect us to fight Donovan's mob with truncheons?"

"You know the E.G. rule about firearms," Parfet snapped. "Only to be used in the event of armed invasion. For the past couple of centuries the British Bobby has got by with a truncheon. And we'll do the same."

"You're risking the lives of women and children," Yailor said. "For the sake of a principle."

Parfet pointed inside the copter. "Man your radio, please Ralf."

With a show of reluctance Yailor folded his long body into the pilot's seat and switched on the radio. Some members of No. 1 Squad self-consciously swinging their truncheons, appeared for a moment on the road and then filed into the trees. Parfet, Kerry and Astra went back into the administrator's office. The loudspeaker was broadcasting the reports from the scouts.

"Westmacott here; Perimeter No. 3. All quiet."

"Belinsky here: Perimeter No. 4. All quiet."

"Dreiser here: Perimeter No. 5. All quiet."

Kerry looked over on the wall map and saw the various patrol areas. Evidently someone had given a lot of thought to the defence of Marnforest and the Settlement. A young, dark-haired girl with slanting eyes acknowledged the reports and noted them down in her log-book. Occasionally she made a call to one of the scouts.

"Come in Larson: Perimeter No. 7."

"Larson here: Perimeter No. 7. All quiet."

It was the old game of cops and robbers, Kerry reflected. And, as always, the robbers didn't stand a chance, because the cops were organised.

"Crouch here: Steamy Canyon Bridge. All quiet."

"McNab here: Gluck-store. Montgomery and Tasso working Inside. No sign of raiders."

"Roger, McNab: Come in No. 2 Squad."

"Chiverton here: No. 2 Squad proceeding as instructed. All quiet."

"Nice work Loo!" Parfet said without taking his gaze from the map. "Any reports from the miners' and farmers' contingents?"

"Yes, Administrator. The miners are on their way. They expect to arrive at the Hub at 2315. But there's no news from the farmers."

"I thought the miners would be on their way," Astra said to Kerry. "They get fed up out there in the desert. Every now and then they go on the spree in Shedtown."

"Give Jack Swann a shout!" Parfet said to Loo. He turned to Kerry. "Jack's the chairman of the farming community. He's an excellent man, but he doesn't like leaving the farms."

"A true farmer!"

"He's on the air now," Loo said presently.

Parfet took the microphone.

"Hello Jack. Parfet here. When can we expect your boys?"

"Swann here. Sorry Baden; but I can't get 'em to budge. There's been some talk of the giant goldie being seen in the vicinity. And the womenfolk are all insisting that the men stay at home and guard the farms."

For a moment Parfet looked exasperated. But he was not a man to betray his feeling for long.

"They're a crowd of stupid peasants," Astra told Kerry. "Even if there were a giant goldie he surely wouldn't hurt them."

"Bonelli here: Miners' contingent just arrived East Boundary."

"Parfet here: Roger Bonelli. Ask them to report to Settlement Centre."

Kerry watched Parfet hand the mike back to Loo and then go outside to welcome the miners' contingent. With all the activity he felt strangely detached. His job was not to get involved with the defence of the Settlement but to find out who had killed the goldies. If things got too bad he would undoubtedly give a hand. But Parfet and the Settlement personnel seemed to have the situation well under control. As Parfet had pointed out, Donovan would probably bolt when he found the Settlement on guard against him.

Kerry's confidence in the defenders increased when he saw the miners' contingent disembark from their tommy-trucks and fall in across the centre of the Hub. Wearing their protective helmets, the tough-looking, brawny men were armed with huge spanners and pick-handles. As they got into line they shouted bawdy remarks to one another. One man described in detail what he proposed to do with Donovan's dummy hand. Against men like these, Donovan's drunken rabble didn't stand a chance.

Kerry's thoughts went back to the slaughtered goldies. Donovan, the plesh-happy megalomaniac, was suspect number one. But he was not the only one that Kerry planned to interview. There was Eve Tasso, for example. Why had she been in the *Pig's Ear* that evening? And why had she gone through that particular door so soon after Donovan and his thugs. And there was Ian Montgomery who considered the goldies as mere cattle. And next on Kerry's list came Ralf Yailor. Yailor had something fanatical about him. His dislike of Donovan was almost psychopathic. Had he also found some cause to dislike the goldies? To dislike them enough to kill them?

Kerry's train of thought was interrupted as Astra came out of Parfet's office and approached the administrator.

"Isaac Cohen, patrolling No. 1 sector reports six tommy-trucks approaching from the direction of the spaceport."

"Thank you, Astra." Parfet returned to his office with Mike O'Grady, the Chairman of the Miners' Trade Union. He pointed to the map.

"We've got No. 2 Squad waiting there with some road-blocks, Mike. I want you to take your fellows to this point in case Donovan's men outflank them. A dozen men can defend the bridge, but the raiders will probably attempt to bridge the canyon in half a dozen places. Keep in touch by radio."

O'Grady saluted with one finger against the metal of his helmet and brandished his monkey-wrench. "Very good, Administrator!"

"And Mike, there's one point I'd like to make before your boys start fighting."

"Yes?" O'Grady was obviously straining at the leash.

"Mike; try to persuade your boys to pull their punches a little. We want Donovan's thugs taught a lesson. But we don't

want the Medical Wing overcrowded with fractured skulls and broken limb cases.

O'Grady laughed through clenched teeth.

"You mean you want enemy casualties fed to the salamanders down Steamy Canyon?"

Parfet did not echo O'Grady's laughter. "I do not, Mike; and well you know it. This is no time for speeches; but try to remember we're defending Civilisation against the rule of drunken mob. But the individuals in that mob are human beings like you and me. Our objective is to civilise them, not to break their skulls. So far as Ecti's concerned we're at the dawn of history. And the importance of anything we do may be magnified to an almost frightening extent."

O'Grady sobered suddenly.

"Very good, Baden. I'll do what I can to keep violence down to a minimum."

Chapter Five

When the miners had gone to take up their positions there was a brief silence in Parfet's office. Parfet took over from Loo and ordered radio-silence except for the passing of enemy-reports. Kerry, standing behind the desk with Astra and Loo, listened to Ralf Yailor's observation reports and followed the progress of the action on the map.

"Yailor here: Donovan's men have abandoned tommy-trucks west of No. 2 Squad's road blocks and have disappeared into the trees."

"Parfet here: Roger, Yailor. Continue observation and reporting. Come in O'Grady."

"O'Grady here. Receiving."

"Parfet here: Take the miners' contingent, apart from the bridge party, into the trees south of Steamy Canyon and west of Kindergarten Wing. Intercept raiders and attempt to drive them back to west boundary."

"O'Grady here: Roger."

A tense silence followed. Kerry looked through the office window at the palm trees and the lights beyond them. All was calm. It looked like a film-set for a romantic musical. And it was hard to imagine that somewhere out there, violent men were stalking each other through the trees. It was all very

well for Parfet to warn O'Grady against undue violence. But Donovan's men would have no such scruples. And once they began to fight dirty the miners would not be slow to retaliate.

Ecti was an infant world. Its history book was free from memories as the mind of a child. Whatever was written there this night would be indelible. Kerry wondered what the gentle goldies were doing at that moment, and what they thought of it all.

Suddenly a metallic voice broke radio-silence.

"Yailor here: A strong force of raiders has bridged Steamy Canyon east of main bridge. They are approaching the Settlement from the north. Apparently heading for the gluck-store."

Kerry felt Astra grip his arm. "Donovan's after the glucks," she said. "There's a full load in the store. Ian's ordered two Tommy-trucks to transport them to the spaceport. The Earthship is due to collect them in the morning."

"McNab here: Still all quiet in vicinity of gluck-store."

"Parfet here: Roger. Maintain radio silence until raiders are sighted."

The administrator after a further study of the map ordered No. 1 Squad into the trees north of the gluck-store.

Kerry, Loo and Astra stood staring into the gauze face of the speaker. Then Yailor's voice broke silence again.

"Yailor here: The raiders have changed their line of advance and are now heading in the direction of the Kindergarten. I can see Donovan at the head of the mob."

"Parfet here: Roger, Yailor. No. 1 Squad, No. 2 Squad and miners' contingent proceed to vicinity of Kindergarten Wing immediately. The defence of the Kindergarten is now our main objective."

But Yailor's voice again squawked over the air.

"Listen Parfet. Donovan's latest move is just a ruse. If we muster all our forces at the Kindergarten we leave the gluck-store unguarded. There's a hundred million credits worth of glucks in that store."

"Parfet here: Roger, Yailor. The gluck-store is of secondary importance. We must defend Kindergarten at all costs. All Settlement forces except radio scouts will report to the Kindergarten immediately."

Kerry turned to Astra. "Im going out to see what's happening," he said. And without waiting for a reply he let himself out of the door and strode to the Settlement Hub, trying to recall in which of the vast spokes of the wheel the Kindergarten was situated.

In all the wings but one, lights shone brilliantly out upon the infiltrating palm-leaves, making them glow like silver. The one darkened wing would obviously be the kindergarten where the children were sleeping. But there would be others in that wing who were wide awake. The nurses and teachers, the old people, invalids and expectant mothers who had been placed there for protection.

Kerry walked quickly along the road which led towards Steamy Canyon and eventually to the spaceport. Despite the road-lights it was silent and gloomy. It seemed to disappear into a tunnel of over-arching palm-fronds. After a couple of hundred metres Kerry left the road and began to run through the trees in the direction of the far end of the Kindergarten Wing. It was cool and dark in the forest. An acrid smell of rotting leaves hung in the windless air.

Presently he detected movements ahead. Men were converging under the silent trees. Donovan's raiders and the Settlement defenders. No. 1 Squad, No. 2 Squad, and the miners' contingent. He realised that he would have to steer clear of all of them, for few of the defenders would recognise him for a friend. He didn't relish the idea of falling foul of a bunch of O'Grady's workmates.

A light kept flashing ahead. Kerry pushed silently through the heavy fronds of the trees. At length he saw someone was training a searchlight from side to side over a wide clearing north of the Kindergarten Wing. Keeping to the trees, he manoeuvred into a better vantage-point. The clearing was obviously a recreation ground. The searchlight kept illuminating a box-horse, some parallel bars, a basket-ball net, and, further out, a set of goal-posts.

The defenders were arriving silently over the thick forest carpet and taking up positions just clear of the kindergarten wall. Without orders, without officers, their discipline was good. They were intelligent men defending their women and children.

If it came to a pitched battle, that battle would probably be fought on the recreation ground. He wondered if Donovan would be able to urge his riff-raff mob to advance into the open. The thug policy was to attack briefly in the dark under cover.

What was Donovan's motive? Kerry wondered. Was his attack on the Kindergarten merely a ruse to distract attention from the gluck-store? Or did he really plan to take over the Settlement by force and so rule the whole of Northland and control the profitable gluck trade? Surely he must know that the Earth Government would retaliate! But human history was crowded with examples to prove that such knowledge would not deter a determined adventurer crazy for power.

A sudden sound behind him made Kerry turn. Lightfooted as a dancer, he swung round and crouched warily, ready to spring. Something white materialised. A person walking softly over the leaf mould.

"All right, Kerry! It's only me."

"Astra! What are you doing here?"

"I just came to see what's going on. Yailor has just reported that Donovan's men are almost at the Kindergarten. But Donovan himself is not with them."

Kerry gripped her arm. "Which way is the gluck store?"

"The far side of the Settlement; at the desert end of the road."

"Come on! Let's get round there!"

As he spoke, the searchlight played on the vanguard of the raiders, as, armed with clubs, pikes, and crude, home-made cutlasses, they emerged from the trees at the far side of the recreation ground. Blear-eyed prospectors, gin-bribed soaks from the bars fringing Electric Bay; and gaudily-clad tourist adventurers out for kicks. Kerry knew they didn't stand a chance once O'Grady's buddies started working overtime.

Having shown themselves at the edge of the clearing, they made no attempt to attack.

"Come on!" Kerry said. "They're just keeping our men bottled up there while Donovan raids the gluck-store."

Astra knew the way perfectly. They cut through the trees again; then crossed the Hub, and hurried once more into the trees, to emerge at the main road a hundred kilometres from

the side-road leading to the gluck-store gate. Once clear of the trees they found a man lying at the roadside. Astra started towards him. But Kerry held her back.

"Be careful. It might be a trap."

Rows of lights cast a dim glow down on the straight road that linked up the desert with the spaceport. In the glow, the prone, white-clad figure could be seen to writhe as though in extreme pain.

"It's Donald McNab," Astra said. "He's the scout detailed to guard the gluck-store."

Kerry kicked something as they approached him. It was the remains of a portable radio transceiver. They crouched down beside McNab. "What's wrong Donald?" Astra asked.

McNab's voice was low but distinctly audible in the forest silence. Blood from a head-wound had matted a big patch of his sandy hair. "Donovan's at the gluck-store with Ian Montgomery and Eve Tasso. They're in the conspiracy together. They . . ." He closed his eyes and his face distorted with pain.

Astra took a handkerchief from her pocket and held it to the wound on his head. "I'll stay here with Donald until we can get help," she said to Kerry. "You carry on. But please be careful!"

"Let's shift him under the trees," Kerry said. "Donovan might run him over when he comes by presently."

They helped Donald to his feet. Gently they guided him clear of the road and sat him down with his back against a tree trunk.

"I'll be all right for a while," he said painfully. "You go after Donovan and the others!"

They left him there, promising to send help as quickly as possible. Soon he was lost in the gloom behind them and ahead of them two tommy-trucks with their cargo-spaces uncovered, stood outside the open gate of the gluck-store.

The dim glow from the road-lamps showed Eve Tasso leaning over the wheel of one of the trucks. Behind the trucks, as though competing in a race, Donovan and Ian Montgomery were furiously loading glucks into the cargo-spaces. The glucks shone dully, like clouds of sparks from a dying fire. Donovan, despite his dummy hand, worked faster than Montgomery. When his truck was loaded, he jabbed the button which slid the perspex dome over the cargo-space.

Then he jumped in beside Eve Tasso. Kerry pulled Astra under cover of the trees as the truck passed them on the road.

"We could do with McNab's radio now," Astra said. "To warn them to guard the bridge over Steamy Canyon."

Kerry touched his lips for silence and led the way round the second tommy-truck to where Montgomery was sliding the cover over his cargo of stolen glucks. The U.N.C. man made no attempt to conceal his presence. And, seeing him, Montgomery rushed forward with flying fists. Kerry danced aside and jabbed his assailant once in the stomach. Then, as he bent forward, he brought both fists up underneath his jaw.

Montgomery went over backwards in an aborted somersault. He lay back, panting heavily, on the road.

"Start the truck!" Kerry said to Astra. Then to his intense surprise he saw Montgomery pull something from his pocket which for the past fifty years had been banned on every civilised planet. An automatic pistol.

Kerry's feet left the road as he dived across the intervening space at Montgomery's throat. The gun went off and a bullet sliced harmlessly through the palm-leaves. Ten seconds later a broken pistol followed it; and Montgomery lay dead on the ground.

Donovan's tommy-truck was already well out of sight on the dimly-lit forest road. But as there were no branch-roads this side of the bridge there was no chance of Kerry losing the trail. As they sped along the straight road with the evenly-spaced lights making a monotonous pattern with the dark greenery, he thought about the conspiracy to rob the gluck-store.

Eve Tasso, who yearned for the cities of Earth, felt no allegiance to the colonists of Ecti. Montgomery, infatuated, had followed her lead. Together they had schemed to use Donovan's thugs to threaten the Kindergarten while the three of them removed the costly consignment from the gluck-store. No doubt Donovan planned to doublecross his band of ruffians. He would leave them to face the music on Ecti while he took a free-spacer to Scadi or some other planet where Earth Government had no power.

There was a glint of perspex ahead. Astra slowed the tommy-truck. The glint ahead could only be from the truck

Eve Tasso was driving. Kerry peered through the windscreen. Now lights glowed and flashed. They silvered the drooping palm-fronts and inked weird acanthine shadows across the road.

"What's going on?" Astra said in an awed voice.

Kerry narrowed his eyes.

"Looks as though the Settlement boys are chasing the Shedtoun rabble."

The babble of many voices disturbed the forest night.

"I don't understand that bright light," Astra said. "I've never seen anything like it before."

They were approaching Steamy Canyon now. A brilliant light, gleaming behind it, showed up the shimmering curtain of climbing steam. It also showed the would-be invaders retreating in disorder over the bridge. On the Settlement side of the bridge, the defenders swung their clubs gleefully, helping the rabble on their way.

Kerry saw a group of helmeted miners swinging their pick handles and huge spanners. But they were striking only the buttocks of the riff-raff as they scurried towards the bridge.

The tommy-truck with Eve Tasso at the wheel had slowed for a few seconds, possibly to allow Donovan to grasp the situation. Now it increased speed again, regardless of the hurrying pedestrians.

Then suddenly, as the truck ahead approached the bridge, Kerry saw a huge figure standing astride the canyon; a huge golden biped glowing with a strange luminescence as steam-clouds wavered about its legs and thighs. The steam and the surrounding trees glowed with whirling rainbows of vibrating colour.

Astra took a hand from the wheel and gripped Kerry's arm.

"The giant goldie!" she said. And there was no fear in her voice, but only a strange awe.

Even as Kerry put his hand out to steady the wheel he saw the truck ahead rush for the bridge, turn drunkenly and crash through the railings, taking with it several of the riff-raff who were crossing on foot. He caught a momentary glimpse of Donovan clawing crazily at Eve Tasso with his metal hand. Then the truck, with Donovan and Eve and its cargo of glucks, plunged into the soundless depths of Steamy Canyon.

Kerry and Astra got out of their truck and walked over to where a group of miners and Settlement men were gazing up, awestruck at the giant goldie.

Presently the light beyond Steamy Canyon grew brighter. Kerry, looking towards it, saw a vast structure with diamond-shaped windows and four finger-like towers reaching high above the trees.

"The Ogre's Castle!" he said. And he realised he had shouted the words aloud.

Presently a voice like music sounded high above them. And he knew that the giant goldie was speaking. "The structure which Earthmen call the Ogre's Castle," it said, "is really the spaceship in which my people arrived on this planet many centuries ago. And now we are using it to leave this planet for another one."

Astra left Kerry's side and stepped towards the giant goldie. Kerry saw the changing colours flash across her face and her clothes.

"Why are you leaving?" she asked in a clear voice.

The colours round the giant goldie brightened and scintillated, covering the whole forest with a blaze of gaudy fire.

"We are leaving because this planet now belongs to the Earthmen. At first we thought we might live in harmony with the men from Earth. We permitted them to build their home in this forest and allowed them to collect our cast-off garments. But they were not content with that. One Earthman attempted to capture us. His desire was to place us in a compound as though we were beasts belonging to some farm or menagerie."

Kerry walked up to Astra, and stood beside her, taking her hand.

"Who are you?" he asked the giant goldie.

Again the colours scintillated. "I am the combined spirits of my people. The emanation of their group-mind. Twelve of my people died because an Earthman removed them from the group. They died by their own hands rather than be separated from the community."

"Who was the Earthman who tried to capture your people?"

"He was a man with good intentions," the giant goldie said. "Farewell Earthmen!"

Astra cried out as the coloured lights vanished. For a moment all was still beside Steamy Canyon. Then the structure they had called the Ogre's Castle rose, slowly at first and then very rapidly, until it became a moving comet among the heavenful of stars.

The following morning Kerry, Astra and Baden Parfet stood in the Administrator's office and looked out of the window. A group of children played on the concrete disc which was the Hub of the Settlement. The children were blissfully unaware of last night's threat to the Kindergarten as they ran in and out of the friendly trees. Perhaps *their* children would read about it in their history books.

"I'm not sorry the gluck trade is ended," Parfet said with a glance at the map of Marnforest. "It gave the planet a false economy. From now on we shall survive as a world strictly by what we can produce by our own culture. There was something highly questionable about living off the droppings of an alien species. But anyway, Kerry, you'll be leaving Ecti now that you've got your case all buttoned up."

Rosa Dorn, accompanied by a nurse, walked past the window. She had asked for a job in the Settlement.

"I for one," Astra said sadly, "am sorry to see the last of the goldies. They were such lovely creatures; this world will be a duller place without them. And it does show us up, rather, to think that as a species we're so darned vile that another intelligent species can't bare to share a planet with us. The goldies must think of us as another race of scads—only more evil, because the poor scads aren't violent."

"Ralf Yailor isn't evil," Kerry pointed out. "Even the giant goldie said he had good intentions."

"The road to Hell is paved with good intentions," Parfet quoted. "Yailor was thinking of the good of the Settlement when he tried to round up the goldies into a pen. He wanted to run a sort of goldie-farm to save manpower collecting the glucks, and to make it harder for Donovan and his poachers. Of course, the goldies killed themselves rather than live as slaves. But Yailor was not to know they'd do that."

"Talk of the devil!" Kerry said.

Yailor came in still wearing the soiled white uniform with the chevrons on the shoulder-tabs. He looked leaner and more worried than ever.

"As soon as you're ready, Kerry. The Earth-ship will be lifting in about an hour. I suppose you've called me some nice names in your report?"

Kerry handed Yailor an open envelope. "Here's my report: read it if you like. I've merely repeated what the giant goldie said: you had good intentions. When you've read it you can seal the envelope and give it to the Earth-ship skipper for Big Bertha Yeyman at U.N.C. Headquarters, Scotland Yard, London.

Yailor looked pop-eyed.

"You mean—you're not going back to Earth?"

Kerry smiled at Astra and took her hand.

"No. That envelope also contains my resignation from the U.N.C. I've decided to stay on Ecti and give a humble hand to help you build a brave new world. Brother, we're going to build a world so good that one day those goldies will be only too glad to come back to it."

W. T. Webb

'Gone Away—No known address'

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There was an "interference" coming from outside the Solar System—something waiting for Man . . .

OUT THERE

by SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

Devil's Cap reared up like a brooding sentinel, stark against the blood-red flush of sunset, at the western end of the island—a bizarre contortion of rock, twisted and scarred and jointed in a score of places, with fantastically slender stalagmites supporting a massive bulk encrusted with knobby tumescences. Doctor Lawrence Ayrton had never seen a more repulsive-looking object ; it did not appear a natural formation at all, he decided, but resembled an outsize specimen of modern sculpture overgrown with barnacles.

Abruptly he turned away, shutting off his train of thought. The wind off the sea had a bite to it, and carried a salty tang and the crashing noise of waves breaking like thunder against the base of the cliff far below. The island was a small one and he could see most of it from his high vantage point ; in a cleft to his right the breakwater of a tiny harbour where a few fishing boats sheltered, and a straggling row of ancient cottages; beyond them, across the raging white horses, the hazy outline of the mainland lay like a reef low on the horizon. And all about him, the heather and stunted grass was already turning brown.

Ayrton was a tall, raw-boned man nearing thirty, with a forceful jaw and cold grey eyes. A faint smile parted his thin lips as he moved back along the chalk path bordering the cliff edge, towards his laboratory, thinking of the tales the fishermen told of Devil's Cap . . . of eerie green lights seen after dark and a strange high-pitched whistling. It was haunted, they said, and would not go near it during the hours of darkness. And this was the space age, he thought bleakly, with satellites

circling overhead and men in orbit, Canaveral preparing for the moonshot. His smile carried a suggestion of superiority.

A shadow fell across the island. He looked skyward, but saw nothing unusual, and frowned. The darkness spread, giving the air an opaque quality; the wind dropped and he no longer heard the roar of the sea. The eerie atmosphere needled him, made him restless, disturbed in himself. He sought for some natural explanation of the shadow and could not find one. He shrugged off his mood of unease and continued along the cliff-top, watching for the sixty-foot bowl of his radio-telescope.

The stillness lasted, and he experienced a curious metallic taste in his mouth, as though two prongs of an electric cell were pressed across his tongue. Then he saw the mirror, like a giant searchlight, dish-shaped to reflect radio waves from the stars on to its aerial. It should have been pointing at M-31 in Andromeda—but now it oscillated like a mad thing, swinging wildly from side to side in the windless air. Sight of its insane gyration alarmed him and the thought ran through his head: what the hell was she doing now?

He broke into a run, loping towards the compact wooden laboratory under the great bowl, wrenched open the door and burst inside. Wires suspended from brackets trailed round the walls; banks of instruments set in plastic panels were propped up on metal benches; the electric motor driving the huge reflector whined at high pitch. In a chair in front of a television screen, Judith, petite, painted and fragile, slumped, her chestnut hair mussed up. "What the devil's going on now?" he demanded harshly.

She turned in the chair, her body rigid and eyes dilated. "I can't control it," she said slowly. "Something's wrong. There's a kind of—interference."

Ayrton snorted, pushed her roughly aside. She seemed reluctant to leave the screen, as though hypnotized by it, but now the spell broke and words gushed from orange, heart-shaped lips: "Something strange happened, Laurie. I don't know how to put it . . . like a cold wind passing over me, and—" She stopped, blinking in the light. "You know what the fishermen say, the island's haunted—"

Ayrton laughed scornfully, ridiculing her. "Old men's tales! Forget it. I know one thing, I'm going on with my work here till I get the right answers. And no ghostly manifestations are going to stop me." He remembered the laughter at the University lab where he'd worked previously, when he

suggested connecting up a video screen to the radio-telescope. The jeers still rankled. He glanced at the screen, slid into the seat she had occupied. There was something on the cathode tube and excitement mounted inside him. "This looks promising . . ."

A pattern of light and shade, dark streaks and blobs spread and converged and separated, shadow-things coming and going like ink splashed over a tilted board, running, coalescing, breaking up.

Judith gripped his shoulder and her voice rose. "It scares me, Laurie. Something's going on I don't understand. I want to get out of it."

Ayrton shook off her hand, ignoring her. A hysterical woman was a menace, he thought savagely, concentrating on the screen. He set the big scope back on course, adjusted the cathode ray tube for brightness, focussed the ever-changing pattern. He had a moment of intuition when he realized just how much older she was; shrew-like, her tongue lashed him: "Maybe the fishermen know more than you for all your scientific training. They live closer to nature and that gives them—"

"Nuts," he snapped back, still moving the tuning dial. The pattern faded . . . and in that instant he became aware of the howling wind, the pounding of the sea against cliff. Strange, that silence, uncanny almost. He felt the hairs on the nape of his neck bristle, and laughed to quell the momentary doubt in his mind. Maybe—

"Impossible to leave now anyway," he said, swinging to face her. "The sea would smash the boat to pieces soon as we left harbour." He wrestled again with the fleeting pattern, cursed, lit a cigarette. The smoke set him coughing . . .

If they hadn't laughed at the university when he'd propounded his idea, he wouldn't be stuck here with Judith. He remembered the cutting voice of old Stanton, the Vice-President: "No-one but a credulous young fool would even dream of linking a television unit to a radio-telescope, Ayrton. What in heaven's name do you expect to get? Colour views from the stars of flower-headed aliens? Quit this nonsense and get back to serious research and we'll forget all about your cranky notion . . ."

So when he met Judith—the Judith Oliver, wealthy heiress of a City financier—and saw she'd fallen for his particular brand of scientific zeal, so different from the empty-headed playboys

she usually went around with, he grabbed his chance with both hands and married her promptly. Now she provided the money for his private research project.

They'd discovered the island on their honeymoon, an isolated spot away from the random noise of city background. It was small, the population negligible, just a few old fishermen living on their catch—the youngsters had already gone to the mainland for better-paid, softer jobs. There were a few trippers in the season, but not many, and no interference with his work. He'd shipped his equipment across and set up the sixty-foot aerial to study radio emission from the stars, electro-magnetic waves that travelled across space and time. The first tests had been non-conclusive, but he was yet in an experimental stage, and hoped for definite results. Then he'd go back and prove them wrong, wipe the silly grins off their faces.

It was tough on Judith, of course, with no friends to gossip with and no gay whirl of society life to distract her. Used to everything that money could buy, being waited on, she had to rough it on the island. With no real interest in scientific research, the long months of loneliness preyed on her mind till she began to imagine things . . . that damned legend, he thought, ridiculous . . . but was a silent wind and the soundless sea any less ridiculous? He remembered the geologist who had visited them during the summer, chipping fragments of rock off Devil's Cap. He had gone away, muttering, "Old, it's old, right enough—queer formation, too." The hell with him, Ayrton thought savagely, and concentrated on the screen.

The tube glowed to life, and dimly suggestive shapes began to form; then the interference came back, like ink spilt across a picture, ruining it . . . and he had the harsh metallic taste in his mouth again. What caused that? he wondered. Too much smoking? He threw down his butt in disgust.

Doubt grew in him as he watched the blobs coalesce and break up into streaks that ran across the screen . . . and a phrase, unbidden, darted into his head; like cracks in the fabric of the universe. His stomach muscles tightened in the beginning of fear and he looked hard into Judith's small, scared face. She whispered, in a strained way: "We must go, Laurie, get away before it's too late. I'm frightened. I just know something terrible is going to happen."

"We're staying," he answered bluntly, "till I prove my idea. We don't leave until I'm ready." If he could find a common factor to the pattern, he thought excitedly . . . and adjusted

the tube till it held a sharply focused unwavering image. He sucked in air, startled. It was a picture.

The sudden resolving of a definite image shook Ayrton. He leaned forward, intent, breathing hard, stared incredulously at a glittering silver shape compounded of rods and spheres linked in baffling profusion and reminding him of . . . exactly what did it remind him of? There was a nagging insistence at the back of his mind that he should recognize this thing. What the devil was it?"

The silver shape grew in size, half-filling the thirty-inch screen, bright against dark emptiness. Another form grew down from the top of the screen, closely following the path of the first; this one was crystalloid in form, pulsing, continuously expanding and contracting. The two glittering enigmas swung closer together against the black back-drop—only now there were bright specks of unwinking light in the dark behind them.

A radiant beam speared from the crystal and the rod-and-sphere assembly began to glow with eye-searing brightness where the beam touched it. The crystal pulsed even more furiously, expanding and contracting with great rapidity; it swelled to fill the picture area as the first silver shape fell away towards the bottom of the screen; and still the radiant beam followed it down. There was nothing to gauge the size of the things, yet he felt instinctively that they were huge.

A curved horizon crept into the bottom of the picture and a misty haze steamed upwards as the tumbling, slowly revolving rod-and-sphere structure fell towards it. He had a close-up now of the horizon, of immense trees and swampland and rising vapours, flying reptiles and a long snake-like neck swaying among dense jungle foliage. As the first silver shape dropped out of sight into the swamp, the haze blotted everything from view . . . everything except the receding crystalloid form silhouetted against the dark void, disappearing at tremendous velocity.

Ayrton trembled. He felt Judith's hand clutch at his shoulder, heard her sob. "What was it?" she gulped in a scared tone. "What on earth was it?"

There was no more to see. He sat limp, unbelieving, staring at the blank screen, fascinated by the memory of that picture sequence, disturbed in his mind and doubting his own senses. No-one would believe him, he thought numbly—a camera! Where could he get hold of a movie camera fast, rig it up to

film the pictures if they ever came back? He sat frozen in his chair until Judith screamed shrilly: "The shapes . . . they're back!"

He jerked upright, glanced from her fear-haunted face to the cathode ray tube. "I'm afraid," she moaned, swaying, pulling at him. "Afraid! For God's sake, Laurie, take me out of this. I know something awful is about to happen . . . I just know it!"

The lab was silent, the air still. And, on the screen, the black blobs writhed and formed streaks, cracks in the universe running wild, running up and down the screen. As he stared, he felt a lethargy steal over him, a purpose slip into his mind . . . something he must do.

Judith watched him alter. As he looked intently at the changing pattern on the screen, his body relaxed and the taut lines of his face slackened. He rose to his feet, turning towards her, and she thrust her fists against her mouth to stifle the scream in her throat. He looked like a sleep-walker. She grabbed at him, and he threw her from him; she hit the floor and bounced, lay motionless as he took a claw hammer from the tool kit. Terrified, she saw him come at her . . . pass her by without recognition, open the door and stalk out into the night.

Shuddering, she ran after him, afraid to be alone. Ahead of her, on the cliff, she glimpsed his dim figure under a black, brooding shadow. There was no wind, no sea-sound; only the light from the laboratory behind her and the hovering shadow.

She stumbled along the chalk path, saw him head towards Devil's Cap, and knowledge of his destination frightened her. She had to stop him, or something terrible would happen. She knew it. She ran faster, but he was moving swiftly, surely in the darkness, and she wrenched her ankle and fell, sobbing. She crawled forward, her gaze fixed intently on him.

He finally reached the gaunt, rearing shape of Devil's Cap, and it seemed to her a ghostly parody of the silver thing that had fallen across the radar screen. Slowly, he began to climb the rocky edifice. She screamed at him to stop but, if he heard, he took no notice. Her heart beat faster as he continued his ascent, hand over hand, from rocky knob to ledge to pinnacle, up the slender spire. It was quiet on the cliff edge with the sea far below as he started to chip at the rock with his hammer. Pieces flew off, making small eerie sounds in the great silence all about her.

He broke off a chunk about the size of a gallon can and descended with it to the ground. He attacked it with his hammer, breaking away the encrusted rock to lay bare a smooth cylindrical object that radiated green luminosity . . . and she remembered the tales the fishermen told and was afraid. He stood up, holding the pulsating cylinder, pointing it at Devil's Cap. A beam of greenish light flowed out, bathed the ancient malformed rock—and the rock changed, melted away like volcanic lava, spilling down the cliff face to the silent sea.

Devil's Cap stood revealed as a tarnished silver structure of interconnected rods and spheres, like the thing seen on the screen. She held her breath, waiting, frozen in terror . . . then a crescent-shaped opening appeared in the largest sphere and Lawrence Ayrton shrieked and turned, ran headlong from that place with his hands over his eyes. He crashed into her and they sprawled on the ground in a tangled heap. She clung desperately to him, teeth chattering. "What is it, Laurie? For God's sake, what is it?"

"Illusion," he croaked, shuddering. "Nothing but illusion." His voice sounded half-strangled, his face was pale and drawn as he hurried her back to the laboratory under the radio reflector and barred the door. He sank into a chair, avoiding her eyes, unspeaking.

Something was loose on the island, something . . . unknown.

The night hours dragged on in endless suspense. Once, desperate with nervous tension, he tried their radio-telephone link with the mainland; it was dead. They could expect no help. They could only wait. Their breathing rasped harshly into the stillness, and again he felt the metallic taste on his tongue, stronger now. Then the silence was broken, hideously.

From far-off, from the direction of the fishermen's cottages, echoed a blood-freezing wail that reached up—and cut off abruptly. It was immediately followed by a high-pitched trilling whistle that held an unearthly quality.

Judith flung herself into his arms, shaking. "The fishermen," she moaned. They strained their ears in the long silence as seconds dragged into minutes. Ayrton stared over her shoulder at the window, wet his lips. Even the sky-shadow was blocked by . . . something moving on the cliff, moving slowly nearer the tiny laboratory under the radar bowl.

He looked quickly away, gripped her tighter, felt her breath come in ragged gulps. He couldn't force himself to look again.

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His throat had dried up, made speech difficult. "I'm sorry, Judy . . . sorry." She made no answer, but rested her head quietly on his chest.

Then, suddenly, from somewhere outside, came a creaking and straining of metal. She lifted her head to look into his eyes. "The bowl," she whispered, trembling. "Whatever it is . . . it's arrived." They waited, paralysed, afraid to face the thing beyond the door, afraid even to look upon it.

Ayrton flung her to the floor and covered her with his own body as the rending of metal sounded again. The aerial crashed about them and the wooden roof of the lab sagged and collapsed. Dust filled the air. Ayrton found himself pinned down by a fallen beam, but dare not move. He held her tightly.

In the stillness an eerie whistling started up. He kept his eyes tight-closed, hardly breathing. Judith whimpered like a whipped puppy beside him and he felt pity for her. He put his arms protectively about her quivering form as they lay together under the wreckage, shrouded in falling dust.

The silence lasted an eternity. Something probed blindly—and retreated. Ayrton tried to block from his mind the visual memory of the thing he had half-glimpsed as the sphere opened . . . sensed its presence close by. His spine felt like ice and his scalp prickled. A pulse beat madly in his skull . . .

He cradled Judith in his arms, felt the great dry sobs rack her body, and after a long while, lifted his head and sniffed the air. A foul stench reached his nostrils, choked him. He gagged, muttered, "Got to get out of here." He pushed at the beam pinning him and wriggled clear, drew Judith after him. He leant his weight against the rear wall off the laboratory and it fell away.

Something lay there, something shapeless and palpitating, vague in the darkness. He did not go close and looked the other way. But his mind exulted . . . out of its natural element, he thought wildly, and laughed. The thing was decomposing rapidly . . .

They ran through starlight glinting on a trail of slime that led up from the cottages, and the wind rose to a howl and the sound of the sea returned to the island.

It's over, he thought, finished . . . and then remembered : men were building rockets to carry them to the Moon and beyond—and all the while, something waited, out there.